PC GAMER®

STAR CITIZEN

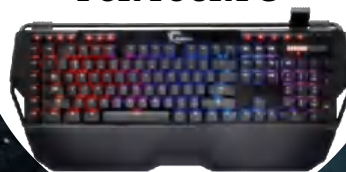**EXCLUSIVE STUDIO ACCESS**

MARK HAMILL STARS IN THE SPIRITUAL SUCCESSOR TO WING COMMANDER

THE **20** BEST FPS GAMES ON PC
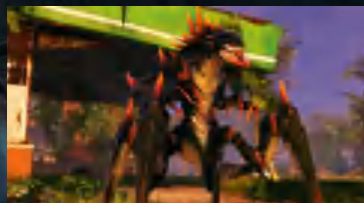
HARDWARE
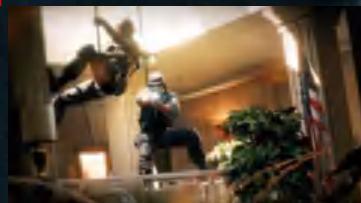## KEYBOARDS
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XCOM 2
NEW ALIENS REVEALED

RAINBOW SIX SIEGE
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BATTLEBORN
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REVIEWS SPECIAL
GUILD WARS 2: HEART OF THORNS / BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT / BROFORCE
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Future

Issue 286
CHRISTMAS 2015

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PC GAMER®

Aim for the stars

We've waited a year to do this *Star Citizen* cover – we wanted to bring you a big feature on this divisive crowdfunded epic. And we have. Join us on p34 for an exclusive look at the campaign element of the game, and a cosy chat with the cast, including Mark Hamill.

Something else that's cool: from March 5-6, 2016, we're hosting the first ever PC Gamer Weekender at the Old Truman Brewery in London, which will include a public hands-on with the latest games and lots more. Check it out at *pcgamer.com/weekender*. Enjoy the issue.

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@SamuelWRoberts

The PC Gamer team

PHIL SAVAGE
Specialist in
MMOs, radiation
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@Octaeder
This month
Phil is sick of reviewing MMOs, so we're giving him smaller reviews now, like *Fallout 4* next issue.

ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Space, Guy Fieri
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@ultrabrilliant
This month
Put a toilet next to his bed (on Mars). Andy's ace diary of life on the red planet starts on p122.

CHRIS THURSTEN
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Dota 2, Luke Skywalker
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@CThursten
This month
Met Mark Hamill in London and had a great time. Samuel went to Basingstoke instead.

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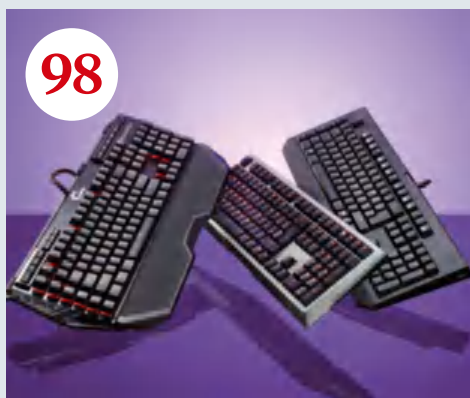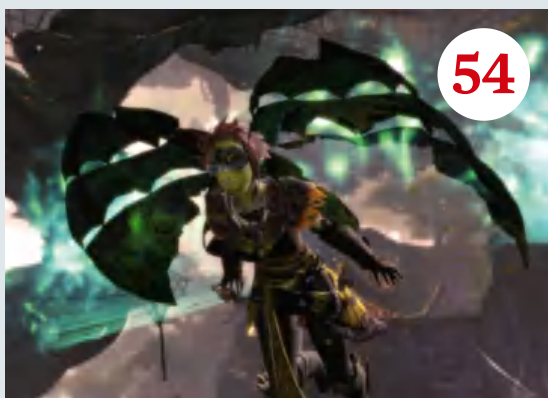
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Dave James bashes away at many keyboards to figure out which is the best for you.

MONITOR

THE PC GAMER VIEW OF THE WORLD

'Third-person urban croucher' is rapidly becoming a genre in its own right.

PARADOX ACQUIRES WHITE WOLF

The **VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE** creators get a new master

Swedish publisher Paradox (*Pillars of Eternity, Cities: Skylines*) has purchased White Wolf Publishing from *EVE Online* developer CCP Games. This is exciting because White Wolf own Vampire: The Masquerade, a table-top RPG that spawned, among other things, cult PC game *Bloodlines.*

"We've been huge fans of White Wolf's IPs for a long time," says Paradox's Shams Jorjani. "Especially World of Darkness and Vampire: The Masquerade. It's going to be great to give them some fresh blood."

CCP Games were working on a *World of Darkness* MMO for years before it was cancelled in 2014. It's unlikely that Paradox will make their own MMO, but they may publish other games using the setting.

"We're going to start licensing out the brand again," says Paradox's Fredrik Wester. "And we'll start with *World of Darkness...* Like Paradox's games, White Wolf's

properties have dedicated, passionate communities. While there are similarities in spirit, theirs have very different themes, and deserve their own teams."

It's not clear how much Paradox paid for White Wolf. Wester has said it was in the "tens of millions" – but that is in Swedish Krona. Ten million SEK is about $1.2 million in US dollars, so it's still a substantial amount of money. It's Paradox's biggest investment to date, so they obviously have faith in the licence.

"At CCP, we have great admiration for the White Wolf brands and communities, and it was extremely important to us that

---

"WITH PARADOX, WE KNOW WE ARE LEAVING THE BRANDS IN GOOD HANDS"

---

the acquiring company share the same respect and understanding," says CCP Games CEO Hilmar Veigar Pétursson. "With Paradox, we know we are leaving the brands in good hands."

"White Wolf Publishing has a long history of producing gaming universes that span mediums, including table-top and collectible card games, PC games, and books," reads a press release on Paradox's website. "Paradox Interactive acquired all of White Wolf's brands, and its new subsidiary will pursue development opportunities across relevant categories of games under the White Wolf Publishing name."

Does this mean we'll see a new *Vampire: The Masquerade* RPG on PC? Sadly, *Bloodlines* developer Troika Games no longer exists – it closed its doors in 2005 – but it's a respected brand, and there are plenty of talented independent studios who could work with Paradox and bring it back from the dead in style. ■
Andy Kelly

We'd love to see another *Masquerade* RPG.

"Behind me? I'm not falling for that one."
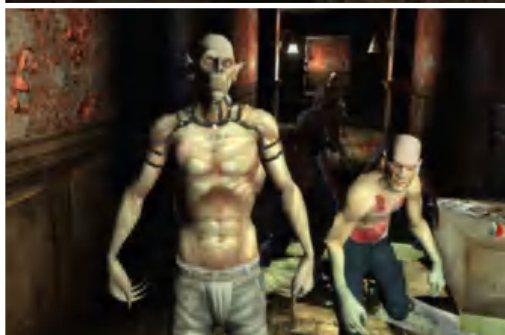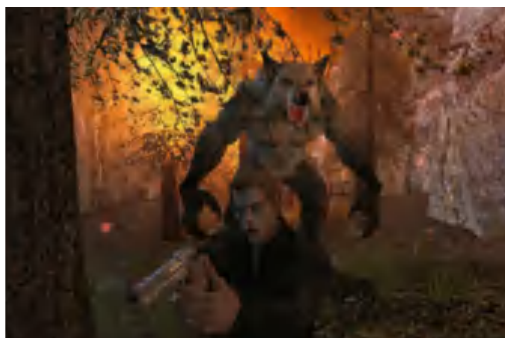
HIGHS & LOWS
THE MONTH IN PC GAMING

HIGHS

Cyberpunk 2077
The majority of *The Witcher 3* team are now working on this futuristic RPG.

Overwatch
Blizzard's colourful new team-based FPS is as fun and polished as we hoped.

Bob Ross
Twitch's Joy of Painting marathon brings out the best in its wild community.

AMD
They're finally ditching their ancient Catalyst software for something more modern.

Heart of Thorns
The first *Guild Wars 2* expansion is a fine addition to ArenaNet's superb MMORPG.

Batman: Arkham Knight
Several patches and a re-release later, people still can't run it properly. What a mess.

Rocket League
That DeLorean DLC was cool for ten minutes, but now *everyone* is using it.

Star Wars Battlefront
We're excited about this, but $50 for a season pass of unknown DLC is steep.

Payday 2
The bank-robbing FPS introduces microtransactions, to much internet anger.

Quake Live
One of the oldest free-to-play games now costs money to play. It was a good run.

LOWS

THE SPY

The Spy knows who mowed the grassy knoll.

The Spy understands the dangers of over-reliance on technology. Sure, an internet-enabled Barrett M107 .50 calibre sniper rifle sounds like a great idea. Until it fails to fire because some lanky poser in thick black-rimmed glasses is using the entirety of Starbucks' wi-fi bandwidth to download the back catalogue of Neutral Milk Hotel. You try explaining to a local paramilitary group that their coup has failed thanks to the continued popularity of pioneering '90s psychedelic folk rock.

Still, technology has its uses. The Spy understands that Valve's popular lane-pusher **Dota 2** runs on technology, and that the data miners at SteamDB used technology to dig around in its files. What did they find? A innocuous little file with an alarming name: hl3.txt. It's possible that 'hl3' stands for Hubert Lifestealer III, and refers to an upcoming *Dota* event in which Lifestealer inherits a 19th century mansion – forced to balance the politics and intrigue of high society with the need to farm jungle creeps for an Abyssal Blade. More likely, it means **Half-Life 3**.

One of the text strings contained within the file certainly hints at the latter. It reads: 'string m_HelpText = "Combine Pulse Ceiling Turret"'.

Hmm. The Spy hadn't previously considered the possibility of a ceiling turret. Also, that thing about the Combine is probably significant.

Before you go cartwheeling down the street in excitement, it's worth knowing that the file also references 'DX7', which could mean DirectX 7. It's unlikely, though – unless *Half-Life 3* has been in production since the Windows 2000 era, years before *Half-Life 2* was released. Is the file a leak? A tease? A deliberate act of trolling by Valve? And how does it relate to the two other files that were found: rpg.txt and ai_basenpc.txt? Is *Half-Life 3* an RPG containing a base full of NPCs? As is usually the case with Valve, all that remains are questions.

No amount of technology – old or new – seems able to crack the wall of silence surrounding Konami. This is now the third month of rumours and speculation surrounding the company, and the fate of *Metal Gear Solid 5* director **Hideo Kojima**. The New Yorker has

IS THE FILE A LEAK? A TEASE? A DELIBERATE ACT OF TROLLING BY VALVE?

claimed that, on October 9, Kojima left Konami's Tokyo office for the last time. According to the New Yorker's Simon Parkin, a farewell party was held for Kojima at Fox Productions, his in-house studio, which was attended by one hundred or so guests. Parkin even tweeted a photo of what appears to be the party in question.

Man Leaves Job shouldn't be the most exciting of stories, even when it's *this* man and *this* job. This being Konami, though, things aren't that simple. The studio has denied the

New Yorker's claims. In a statement to Tokyo Sports, a Konami spokesperson said: "Kojima and the development team are finished developing *Metal Gear Solid V* and are taking a long time off from work." The spokesperson went on to confirm that "currently, Kojima is listed as a company employee." And the photo? "We're not sure what kind of thing this was."

The Spy has raided the underground lairs of enough supervillains to know that 'taking a long time off from work' is usually an euphemism for 'permanent vacation in a shark tank'. Maybe those rumours of high-level employees being made into janitorial staff were a similar attempt at subterfuge. The Spy recommends that workers keep an eye out for the arrival of thousands of kilos of live fish. It's always a dead giveaway.

CIRCULAR REASONING

What can *Halo* teach us about technology in the future? Mostly that mankind's ultimate goal is to develop naked blue AIs – something that shouldn't come as much of a surprise to anybody who's been on the internet. 343 Industries franchise director, Frank O'Connor, recently hinted that **Halo 5** might not be permanently shackled to the Xbox One. "There is plenty of chance that *Halo 5* could appear on the PC," he said during a GamesRadar stream. "Nothing to announce at this point, [but] you know, we developed the game on an Intel platform. It wouldn't be the hardest thing in the world to move it to PC and take advantage of PC stuff. But nothing I announce today on this chat."

Master Chief and his svelte blue companion aren't guaranteed to be heading to PC, though. In fact, Xbox product manager Aaron Greenberg, responding to the sort of deranged tweets you get if your job title is Xbox product manager, confirmed that *Halo 5* is "being made exclusively for Xbox One." Of course, true though that statement may be, it's also somewhat meaningless. Just because something is currently being made for one platform, doesn't mean that it can't be ported sometime after its release. Spy out. ■
The Spy

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LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

What is it?
Five-on-five RPG strategy that emphasises map control.

How is it judged?
Best-of-five series.

What's the format?
Group stages followed by a month-long single-elimination bracket.

Summoning Satan with The Summoner's Cup.

[EVENT REPORT]

NO FAKE

SKT T1 triumphant at the **League of Legends World Championship 2015**

To be the best in the world at something takes a lot of effort. The players on Korean *League of Legends* team SK Telecom T1 have bags of natural ability, but ultimately it was their hard work, dedication, and desire to win that meant they came out on top over the KOO Tigers in the grand final of 2015's League of Legends World Championships.

This year's Worlds took place across Europe, with the group stages set in Paris, the quarter finals in London, the semi finals in Brussels, and the grand final in Berlin. "Personally, I think the enthusiasm the fans have in Europe is amazing," said SKT player Jang 'MaRin' Gyeong-Hwan after the final. The crowd gathered in Berlin's Mercedes-Benz Arena proved this time and time again during the matches, creating an electric atmosphere during pivotal moments.

The entire stage was made of LEDs, enabling both the faces of players and the champions they were playing to be displayed beneath their very feet. When an important game objective was taken, the word 'Dragon' or 'Baron' appeared on stage, as well as on screens around the perimeter of the arena. When an Ace was scored (when every single member of a team has been killed in quick succession), the entire stage was bathed in white light while the crowd went wild. And all the while, a spotlight shone down on the ultimate prize. The Summoner's Cup had its own plinth, in full view for the entire duration of the finals.

SK Telecom T1 were always expected to make it to the final this year, and they did so while going undefeated throughout the group and bracket stages. Before the final, SKT's coach Kim 'kkOma' Jung-gyun said "if we don't win it will be a big failure."

The team's only defeat in the tournament came in game three of the final, causing the fans to go so crazy for the underdogs KOO Tigers that you could no longer hear the shoutcasters over the arena speakers. After that minor hiccup, however, SKT came back strong to take game four in commanding fashion, winning the series 3-1.

SKT also won the championship two years ago, although only their mid-laner Lee 'Faker' Sang-hyeok and top laner Bae 'Bengi' Seong-ung were on the team at the time. Last year, the team failed to even make it to Worlds, so each member is determined to stay at the top this time. They know they'll have to keep putting in monumental effort, but their coach kkOma is confident that they can be successful again upon returning to Korea.

The stage is made almost entirely out of screens.
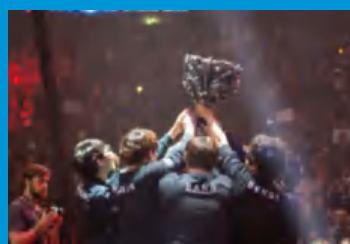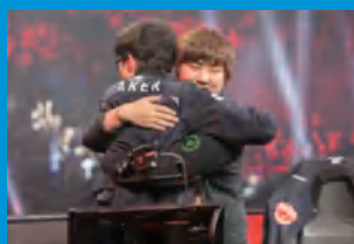
Faker has always been a big part of SKT's success after storming onto the scene two years ago. He is widely regarded as the best player in the world, and he's still only 19. Before the final kkOma said that "Faker is the best he's ever been, not just in the game, but outside the game." That's a scary prospect indeed, and when you consider that his teammates have risen up around him, so that SKT is not just about Faker anymore, you can see why the team has performed so well.

As for the rest of the teams in the tournament, the European entrants made a strong run through the group and bracket stages. Fnatic went undefeated in this year's summer split of the League Championship Series, and made it all the way to the semi final before losing to the KOO Tigers. It was the new team Origen (although mainly made up of veterans) that surprised the most, also making it to the semis before losing to the eventual winners SKT.

The North American teams gave their fans hope by performing very well in the first week of group stages. However a catastrophic second week meant that not

> ## "FAKER IS THE BEST HE'S EVER BEEN, NOT JUST IN THE GAME, BUT OUTSIDE THE GAME"

one of the three teams that made it to Worlds got to the quarter finals. "I think North America has the foundation," Riot Games' head of European eSports told me, "it has good infrastructure with the teams and owners... I'm very confident that NA will continue to develop."

However, as has been the case for the past few years, a Korean team won the League of Legends World Championships. In fact, two Korean teams made it to the final this year for the first time, so is the quality gap growing even larger? SKT's coach kkOma doesn't think so.

"There's hardly a difference between regions right now," he told me. "In scrims, other regions have done well." Their top laner agrees that Korea isn't as far ahead as it seems. "Even though Korea won Worlds this time round, Europe has Fnatic, China has Edward Gaming, and all the Taiwanese teams are really good as well," said MaRin. "So it's going to be really hard to predict who will win in the future." ∎

Matt Porter

Fans at the second annual Firaxicon.

FIRAXIS MEETS ITS FANS

Getting up close and personal with the PC's seminal strategy studio at the second annual **FIRAXICON**

THE SAME BUT MORE

The first Firaxicon took place last year, in a Maryland hotel. Two hundred attendees were given the opportunity to attend panels, try XCOM: The Board Game, and mingle with employees from Firaxis.

This year, it's slightly bigger, having moved to downtown Baltimore, and yet the convention still retains much of the same spirit. "We've kept things at a manageable size," says Firaxis head Sid Meier. "There's maybe over 100 Firaxis people here. There's a good ratio of Firaxis people to fans, I think."

Firaxicon isn't like other fan events. It's smaller and more intimate than QuakeCon, BlizzCon or the Paradox convention. In attendance in Baltimore were over 300 fans, around 100 Firaxis employees and just a handful of journalists – most of them German. Firaxicon isn't built around big announcements. It's tailored for the Firaxis community, letting them get to know the people who make the games they love. It's the studio's earnest attempt to interact with its audience.

This year, the event is being held in a corner of the top floor of the Baltimore Convention Center. To reach it, I have to walk past two floors of a fitness conference where healthy-looking people are lunging aggressively in a rainbow assortment of Lycra. I start to worry that someone will ask if I've self-actualised my full mental, physical and emotional potential. Then, suddenly, nerds. There's a statue of a man reaching out his hand to the alien towering above him. Around it, Firaxis fans mill about, unsure of what to expect. I've found my people.

The majority of Firaxicon exists across a single corridor. There's a shop selling an assortment of *XCOM* and *Civilization* merchandise, and a room full of PCs on which to play *Civilization: Beyond Earth*'s *Rising Tide* expansion. So far, so traditional. It's the other two rooms that capture the spirit of Firaxicon. In one, there's a 'museum'. It's filled with memorabilia from throughout the studio's history. Concept art covers the walls, and a video screen plays a looping feed of Sid Meier's old interviews and talks. In the corner, a statue of a Mechtoid from *Enemy Within* looms over the crowds.

SOCIAL FUNCTION

Opposite the museum is the board game room. It's not just an opportunity to show off XCOM: The Board Game, although that does occupy the majority of tables. Throughout the day the room is filled with both fans and Firaxis employees. It performs an important social function – creating a space where attendees can come together to collaborate and compete as peers. It's heartening to see and gives Firaxicon a feeling unlike any convention I've attended. As fan-driven as EVE Fanfest is, for example, there remains a noticeable divide between developer and consumer.

"I think we've always had an interesting connection with our players and our fans," Sid Meier tells me. "The games that we make seem to inspire a little bit of fanaticism and commitment to playing, and a lot of the

The panels aren't always what you'd expect.

Brave new world

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE *CIVILIZATION V* RETROSPECTIVE PANEL
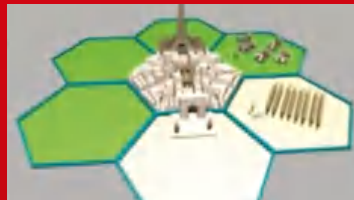
1 SQUARE HOLE
The decision not to use square tiles was a controversial one within the company. To help sell the change, the prototyping team created a video extolling the virtues of a hex-based layout. The result was obviously suitably persuasive.

2 REINVENTING THE WHEEL
Unlike *Civilization IV*, which used Gamebryo, *Civilization V* has a custom-built engine. Building it took time, so in the interim, the designers iterated on a version of the game built inside of *Civilization IV*.

3 WE NEED A MONTAGE
Firaxis didn't want another intro montage and so instead cast its opening movie around the future of a specific character. An early mockup featured an awkward father and son hug that was quickly scrapped.

4 BATTLE ROYALE
To rapidly test AI, programmers built an autoplay system. Later, this was adopted by the community to power the Battle Royale – a massive AI showdown between 60 civilisations who are duking it out for world domination.

---

ideas that we put into our *Civ* games come from our community. There's a lot of interaction online between our designers and the community, and with modding they've contributed a lot to the success of Firaxis. [Firaxicon] is a way of meeting those people and giving them a little more behind the scenes information."

UNPARALLELED PANELS

The most traditional aspect of Firaxicon is the panels, but even they manage to skew expectation. Jake Solomon leads the most conventional: a preview of the upcoming *XCOM 2*, complete with an exclusive viewing of its intro cinematic, a reveal of new aliens and a detailed breakdown of Firaxis' planned modding support. There's an informal and jovial atmosphere, and the audience is tangibly excited by what it's shown.

The other panels take a more unusual approach. What was advertised as a retrospective on *Civilization: Beyond Earth* instead takes the form of an interactive brainstorming session. *Beyond Earth*'s lead designers, Will Miller and David McDonough, conceptualise a pre-civilisation *Civilization* with the audience's help. The ad-hoc creation of *Dawn of Civilization*, as it's named, shows us the process of creating new ideas within the series' set framework. At the end, Sid Meier comes on stage to bring the high concept back to reality – questioning some of the decisions made and

---

SID MEIER COMES ON STAGE TO BRING THE HIGH CONCEPT BACK TO REALITY

---

presenting possible pitfalls drawn from his decades of game design experience.

The pervading sense I get is that Firaxicon is designed for Firaxis as much for the fans. "Most of the people that work at Firaxis don't get that opportunity very often," says Meier. "To understand what we do is important to the people who play these games, enjoy them and get satisfaction out of them. It adds a sense of why it's important to get that game out on time, or why it's important to fix that bug. If you don't fix that bug, somebody's going to experience that. They're going to come up to you and say, 'Hey!'"

"It was at Firaxicon last year that, for the first time, I really saw the kind of person I was when I was playing *Civ*," says David McDonough, explaining why the event is important to him. "A fan of *Civ* playing the game in that room. That was really a moment for me."

The day ends with Sid Meier and Bruce Shelley regaling the audience with stories from MicroProse, and the creation of the original *Civilization*. Then there's a raffle, in which most of the numbers called aren't claimed – a casualty of a long day filled with not all that much to do. As the remaining fans leave the panel theatre, enthusiastic Firaxis employees stand with their arms outstretched for a drive-by high-five. Firaxicon was small and strange, but sincere. Firaxis, I think, is winning the culture victory. ■
Phil Savage

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Just Cause 3

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
December 1	Avalanche	Square Enix	www.justcause.com

JUST CAUSE 3

Nitrous tractor and the infinite rocket C4

As a professional videogame critic, I enter Square Enix's London office fully expecting to blow the lid off *Just Cause 3*. Readers, I imagine, will nod appreciatively at the comprehensive account I give of my three hours of planned play time. "Definitive," they'll say to themselves.

I write down '4,000 animations' in my notebook when, during the pre-hands-on presentation, I'm told that action-hero Rico can now perform 4,000 different animations. That, I think, will be a nice titbit to drop casually into my preview – a tasty morsel of fact on a plate of personal impressions. I draw a little arrow below and write 'smooths out the experience'.

Then I'm shown a 'mod' for Rico's C4 explosive that turns each charge into a booster engine before detonation. My eyes widen at the possibilities. It all goes a bit wrong after that.

Mods are unlocked by spending the 'gears' earned by completing challenges. They're not permanent upgrades – each can be toggled on and off – rather they offer situational side-benefits to be activated and disabled as needed. Rocket-powered C4 is one of these, although I'd argue it's not situational so much as fundamental to everything that *Just Cause 3* is. It's a physics tool in a playground built to make physics hilarious.

In *Just Cause 3*, C4 is infinite. You can only place two charges at once – more after you've unlocked the relevant mods – but, once detonated, they'll recharge.

PLAYED IT

ATTACHING C4 TO A BRIDGE, I DETONATE IT AND START DRIVING ACROSS

Also, you can attach rocket C4 to people. I do. Repeatedly. They spin uncontrollably before exploding. It's great.

As in *Just Cause 2*, you can call down supply drops of any of the weapons or vehicles you've collected. You can enable mods for these, too – for instance, adding nitrous to any vehicle you request. Earlier, I'd noticed a tractor. Can I airdrop one in, and, if so, will it too have nitrous? As it turns out, yes. But even a nitrous-enabled tractor is still a slow, unwieldy thing. I soup it up with four rocket C4s. You can't detonate them while driving, but you can use nitrous to reach top speed, jump out onto the tractor's hood, activate the boosters, and then parachute away seconds before detonation in a glorious moment of explosive agricultural perfection. That's the plan, at least. I mess up the jump and explode along with it.

Next, I call in a bus. This is even slower. I decide to transform it into a rolling battering ram by tethering cars to either side. In *Just Cause 3*, you can attach multiple objects simultaneously – initially two, but with the opportunity to unlock more. I tether four cars to Rico's new party bus. A bemused PR points out that the game also has sports cars, helicopters and military fighter jets. After a few minutes of bashing against each other, the cars and the bus all explode.

STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY

Graduating to a proper car, I find myself at a bridge. *Just Cause 3*'s possibilities for destruction are impressive, but not limitless. This isn't *Red Faction: Guerrilla*, which means that most buildings – usually those that aren't part of dictator Di Ravello's propaganda machine – can't be destroyed. Some can, though, such as bridges and gas stations. In fact, they can be blown up repeatedly. Demolished infrastructure will respawn once Rico has travelled far enough away, giving you the chance to repeatedly relive some of the game's coolest acts of destruction. Attaching C4 to a bridge, I detonate it and start driving across. The structure buckles and collapses around me. It's exhilarating, and I only just make it to the other side.

OK, fine: planes and helicopters. My original plan for the day had been to journey to the remotest island on the map. »

Just Cause 3

Medici's insurance premiums are ridiculous.

That bridge had one day left until retirement.

It's not all explosions and chaos. Just mostly.
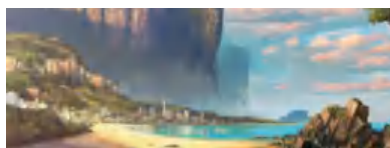
I wanted to discover a secret akin to the *Just Cause 2* Lost-inspired island that instantly downed any planes that flew near. Compelled to be serious for a second, I call in a jet. It spawns at an awkward angle. If I was playing *Just Cause 2* this would be an insurmountable problem, but in *Just Cause 3* you have the ability to contract your tether lines. It's therefore possible for me to attach the jet to a point on the ground, then use contraction to pull it into place. Unfortunately, I detach the tethers before the plane has stopped moving. The momentum carries it over a cliff.

The next plane is destroyed because I accidentally press the eject button instead of the one that makes Rico jump out onto its wings. The one after that is totalled when I try to tether it to a tractor. My helicopters meet with similar disasters – my curiosity rewarded with fatal explosions. One copter is lost when I attempt to jump down onto the car that it's carrying. My plan was to stand on the car's roof, then detach the tether. I wanted to surf it down into a gas station explosion, like Slim Pickens in Dr Strangelove. This almost works, but, due to the positioning of the tether point, the car is being carried at an awkward angle. I hit the windscreen like a particularly large insect, and tumble to my death.

Unlike in *Just Cause 2*, supply drops don't cost money. Each vehicle or weapon is, however, on a cooldown timer before it can be ordered again. This becomes a problem. I quickly exhaust my available supply of airborne transport options, and am forced to wait – up to half an hour for the most powerful vehicles – before I can spawn more. It's a restriction strangely at odds with *Just Cause*'s chaotic sandbox.

After all, this is a game that practically demands acts of wanton destruction and carnage. The towns and villages of Medici are filled with statues, billboards and propaganda towers, and you're rewarded for clearing out dictator Di Ravello's junk. But rather than earning an abstract Chaos score, you can liberate specific places. Do so, and that section of the map is filled in with challenges.

There's still a military response to your actions, but it's been tuned in interesting ways. In *Just Cause 2*, the military were relentless – to the point where it could ruin the fun you were having. It was a game that wanted you to be just naughty enough, but sent waves of well-armed bastards to kill you before you could ever settle into a rhythm. *Just Cause 3*'s military are equally deadly, but their aggression can be managed. Spot and kill a guard who's calling-in backup, and your Wanted meter won't increase. Even if it does, the response feels more localised. If one area gets too hot, you can lose your pursuers with relative ease.

With no access to good vehicles, I revert back to messing around. At one point, I spawn next to an abandoned flatbed trailer. I decide to see if I can use it as a makeshift vehicle by standing on it, tethering it to the road, then retracting the tethers to drag it along. It sort of works, but not really. The game isn't expecting a flatbed to be used in this way. Rico stands motionless, while the trailer slides out from underneath him. Eventually, I manage to get most of the way down a dirt road by running in time with the trailer as it moves. I do this for about five minutes. Finally, inevitably, I plant rocket C4s to the back, and fire it out from under Rico into explosive oblivion.

TRAILER TRASHED

Soon after, I find another trailer near a busy highway. This one curves upwards to create a roadside jump. Using tethers, I'm able to pull it over and fix it onto the road. AI cars don't register the trailer as an obstacle, and drive straight on up and over. This is pretty funny. The next logical step is to attach rocket C4s to its underside, in the hope of giving one lucky driver some serious air. I mistime the detonation – destroying my makeshift stunt rig with no satisfying payoff. Sacrilegious though it may be, I really want a C4 variant that *doesn't* explode. Sometimes, rocket-powered physics fun is its own reward.

At this point it's almost five o'clock. My session is nearly over, and I realise that I haven't really done anything. I quickly call in a jet, and set a beacon for that remote, isolated island. I reach it, but nothing happens. Yes, my plane explodes, but only because I crash it into a cliff. I can see ruins, and what looks like a dirt-track circuit, but no challenges or missions. I leave London, not quite sure how I'm going to turn any of what happened into a *Just Cause 3* preview.

Phil Savage

I WANT TO SURF A CAR DOWN INTO A GAS STATION, LIKE IN DR STRANGELOVE

ADVENT's Stun Lancer unit wields electrified blades.
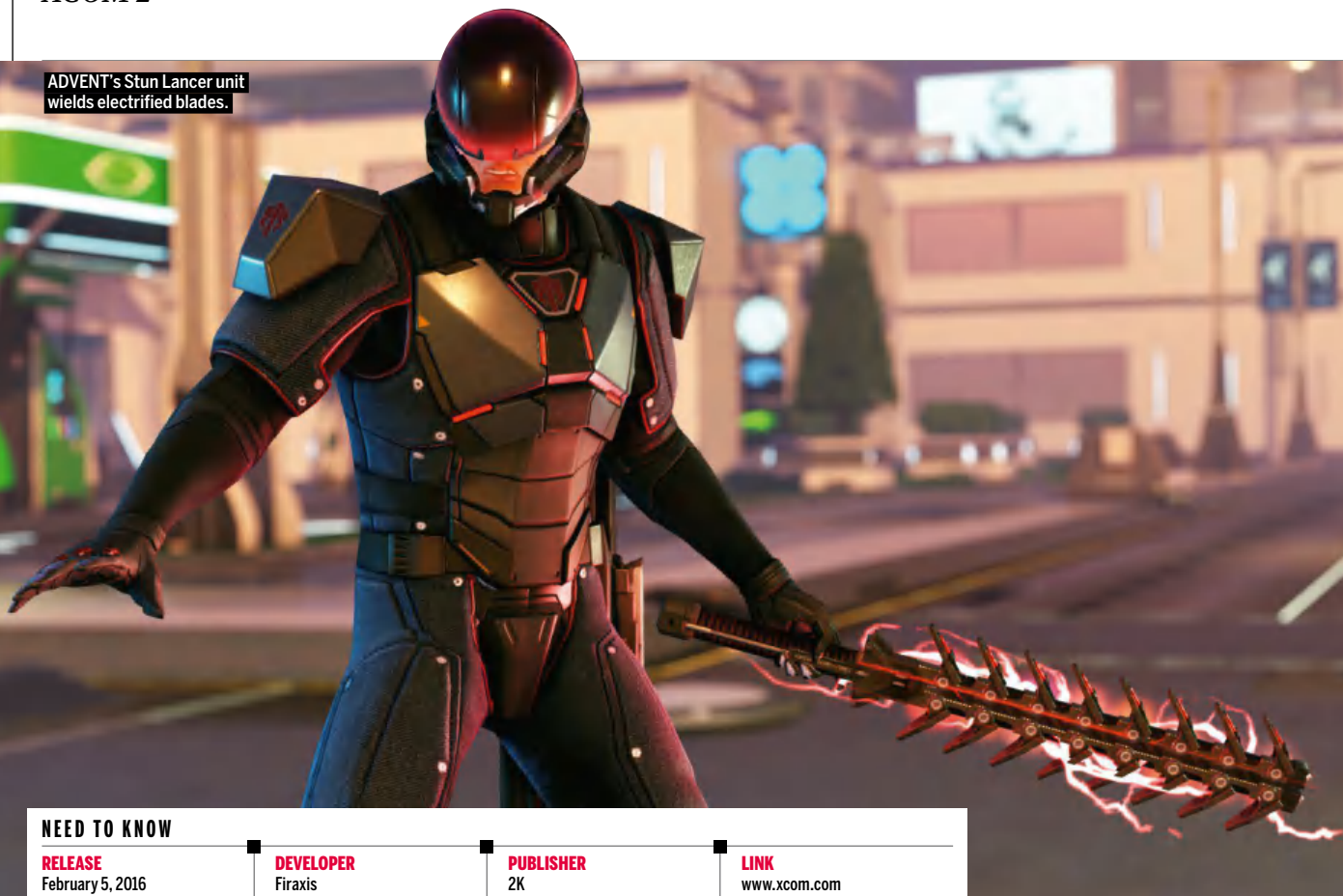
XCOM 2

A menagerie of deadly new monsters revealed

B ad news, *XCOM* players: Firaxis has you sussed out. The developer of *XCOM 2* has cottoned on to the tricks and tactics that carried you through *Enemy Unknown*. It's written into the design of the sequel's enemies. They are, at the most fundamental level, tailored to mess up your shit.

NEW INFO

Mostly that means aliens have ways to deal with an entire squad that's sticking to cover. The Viper, for instance, will pull your troops out of their hiding places, giving her allies an easier attack. More explosively, there's the Archon. He's a less grotesque, more aloof version of the Floater in *Enemy Unknown*. His ability? 'Blazing Pinions', which enables him to fly above the battlefield to deliver an area-of-effect nuke. Like the Floater, he can't take cover. Instead, he's armoured and, if damaged, will be enraged into a battle frenzy.

Even something as simple as rescuing a civilian is no longer without peril, thanks to the Faceless. Undisguised, they're a hideous mass of wrinkled flesh. But when you first encounter them, they'll be disguised as human.

"One direction we could've gone in is to homogenise the aliens, and make them look like they all have a common thread," says art director Greg Foertsch. "With this we're trying to accentuate the menagerie rather than dilute it, not only visually but in their abilities too. We're really trying to push all their abilities apart from each other to get a much broader range."

According to Foertsch, it's not just the aliens that will have a broader range of attacks. "We're doing that with soldiers too. There's a huge contrast in soldier ability, and so when you start pairing them up it becomes a very different experience

"WE'RE TRYING TO ACCENTUATE THE MENAGERIE RATHER THAN DILUTE IT"

– as opposed to there being a much smaller range."

ENEMIES WITHIN

That broadening of skills also applies to ADVENT – the human organisation working with the aliens to wipe out the remnants of XCOM. In *XCOM 2*, even the basic Sectoid will be a significant threat. ADVENT will present a less challenging foe through the game's early missions, but it won't be a pushover.

Firaxicon's second enemy reveal was the ADVENT Shieldbearer, a well armoured tanking unit whose abilities, once again, are specifically designed to force players to vary their tactics. The energy shield pulsates out in a radius and will bolster the armour of any ADVENT unit standing in its area-of-effect.

That's just a small selection of *XCOM 2*'s more interesting enemies. The full game will also boast some returning and much more deadly favourites – including an even more terrifying Chryssalid. The battle for humanity is going to be even harder fought this time around.
Phil Savage

Rainbow Six Siege

Won't somebody please think of the stucco?

Probably should have shut that door.
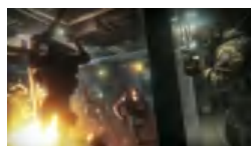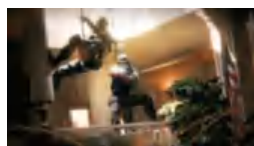
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
December 1	Ubisoft Montreal	Ubisoft	rainbow6.ubi.com/siege

RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

Breach, bang and clear

After a day shooting and being shot in it, I'm confident *Rainbow Six Siege* is going to be a decent competitive shooter. Its three main attractions – singleplayer Situations, PvE Terrorist Hunt, and PvP five-on-five deathmatch – have shown me it's got a potentially long lifespan. But we can't know the full story until it's out in the wild.

You're alone or in a team of up to five. You have to either take out your opposition – up to five human players or dozens of AI – or destroy/rescue/defend an objective (a bomb or hostage). You select one of 20 operatives, ie, character classes, on a first-come, first-served basis, and attack a series of different maps however you like, blowing up walls and ceilings and shooting through doors into people's throats. It's a solid setup for some mad online fun.

Playing with different operatives, one thing became very clear: these boys and girls will have to be very balanced from day one. Each has a different ability, such as firing breaching rounds to take out boarded up doors from a distance, or setting up defensive turrets. Ubi has to ensure these abilities won't be over (or under) powered in any way. A day with the game isn't enough to be certain, but it certainly felt like characters such as Sledge with his tartan sledgehammer, and Mute with his anti-spy-drone signal disruptor, had a part to play.

Playing alternating rounds of attack and defence against another team of five

BLOWING UP WALLS AND SHOOTING THROUGH DOORS INTO PEOPLE'S THROATS

players provided the most fun. Once you've got the hang of using your wheely drone or CCTV cameras to scout for the enemy, setting up traps and bolstering defences, breaching tactically rather than just bashing down any wall you can find, and generally acting as a team, *Siege* begins to show how much fun it can be.

IN PLANE SIGHT

Consider my team's assault on the enemy on the Plane map. First time around, things didn't work out too well as the defenders cleverly gave themselves line of sight by making holes in wooden partitions. We died quickly. The next time, we were tactical. We moved slowly through the aircraft, checking our corners, scouting with drones and communicating. We prevailed, and it felt very good.

That feeling isn't quite as strong when playing the AI. When you breach a rooftop panel with explosives and drop into the middle of a heavily defended room where the hostage is held, human opponents are surprised. You feel you've got one over them. Against the AI, it just feels like you're doing a thing in a game.

PLAYED IT

Ratchet the difficulty up to hard or realistic, and you certainly have a challenge – it's just that the challenge isn't about the AI outwitting you.

They'll flank and use tools and gadgets, sure, but the issue is that now they have unerring accuracy and you die quickly. My team was unable to complete a single mission on anything above normal difficulty, so there's definitely a challenge there for those who wish to play in co-op.

I was also privy to *Siege*'s closest thing to singleplayer: Situations. Basically, this is training with rewards and leaderboards. The five situations I played were fun, but not enough to say "*Rainbow Six Siege* has singleplayer". While you can play Terrorist Hunt alone, it's not a singleplayer experience. Don't let anyone tell you it is.

The core game here is 5v5 multiplayer. A game vying for territory occupied by the likes of *Counter-Strike* – and that's where it's going to come up against a real challenge: is it worth the money? Can it draw players away from the reigning game? And why is the hammer-toting operative Scottish, exactly? I'm not sure, but I'm looking forward to finding out.

Ian Dransfield

Someone's in for a surprise.

Yes, you get to besiege a ski chalet.

Master of Orion

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE TBC	**DEVELOPER** NGD Studios
PUBLISHER Wargaming.net	**LINK** www.masteroforion.com

MASTER OF ORION

FIRST LOOK

The surprisingly fancy return of a '90s 4X series

I f money is for anything, it's for buying all the cool shit you wanted but couldn't afford when you were younger. Wargaming, the publisher best known for *World of Tanks,* has bought the rights to the old 4X series *Master of Orion,* and it's now working on what the company describes as a 'rebirth' developed by some members of the original team at **Simtex.** They're taking key elements from across the series, updating the visuals to look a bit *Mass Effect*ish and adding a new orchestral score.

Master of Orion was one of the earliest 4X games, released about two years after *Civ.* PC Gamer awarded the original a respectable 79% all the way back in issue two, and the sequel a strong 90% in issue 37. This remake draws on elements from both of those games. The third *Orion* was made by a different team and was reviewed less favourably in 2003 (40%).

The game features all the familiar elements of 4X but on a galactic scale. You control fleets moving between planets, and research, conquer and occupy in order to progress. To be honest, I never played the originals, but I was shown the first game in action for comparison, and the difference is monumental: the UI is modern-looking, the spaceships and alien species look high-end, and neat FMV sequences portray your ships landing on a planet for the first time. I'm now curious to discover for myself what made these games such a cult hit back in the '90s.
Samuel Roberts

The Wall Shall Stand

It's like *Minecraft*, but made out of blocs.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBC	Pixel Tailors	In-house	TBC

THE WALL SHALL STAND

Throw off your low-res chains! The revolution will be gamified

An oppressive city. A totalitarian government. A downtrodden populace waiting for the inspiration to rebel. *The Wall Shall Stand* **is the story of a revolution, but not a violent one. This is not a struggle of guns and bombs, but a war of words, protest and propaganda.**

FIRST LOOK You have just four actions. Putting up posters, rallying supporters, hiding in crowds and talking to NPCs. These are the tools by which you are expected to bring about a revolution. The posters turn passers-by to your cause, then you rally these supporters around you to smash the various monuments to the power of The State. Working against you are state propagandists, who will beat you up and steal your posters unless you hide, and propaganda broadcasts, which obliging NPCs can help you shut down.

These tools mesh with a lively sandbox city, full of oppressed blocky citizens trudging their way through another day of tyranny. The flow of pedestrians becomes important: sticking up a poster in a back alley won't do any good, while a main crossroads will net you more converts but risk attracting the ire of the secret police. All this is rendered in a distinctive style that melds Soviet propaganda with low polygon minimalism. "We tried to make the game look like a poster," explains developer Cameron Richards. "Emulating the big blocks of colour, using models that are as minimal as possible, and projecting a grainy texture across everything."

Cameron and the rest of the team, Eddy Burton, Ted Grimes and Steve Sparks, all met at the University of the Arts London. *The Wall Shall Stand* was created to be Eddy, Ted and Cameron's

THE GOAL FROM THE START WAS TO CREATE A GAME THAT WASN'T SOLVED BY VIOLENCE

second year project, but after runaway success at the Dare to be Digital awards it's now nominated for a BAFTA.

Despite the Soviet imagery, no particular ideology is ascribed to either side. Players are encouraged to project their own politics onto the eternal struggle between red and blue. "It's open to interpretation," Cameron says.

The goal from the start was to create a game that wasn't solved by violence. "We often heard things from our playtesters like 'How do I shoot?' and, 'Who do I punch?'" Ted says. "Which was a favourite, because that player's friend immediately responded 'I can only talk.'"

If there's a weakness it's in the objectives. Ultimately you can only gather increasingly large mobs of supporters to topple increasingly impressive statues. To succeed *The Wall Shall Stand* will need goals that better reflect the theme of an ideological struggle, something Cameron admits they're still working on. Given what these four students have already achieved, I'm quietly confident in their ability to deliver something truly unique.
Tom Hatfield

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BATTLEBORN

Presenting the surefire winner of the Most Generic Name 2015

B *attleborn* **is familiarly polished. An online shooter, it's a mash-up of** *Wildstar* **and** *Borderlands,* **with a plot that's pure schlock SF: the last star in the universe is about to be eaten by trans-dimensional entities and you're the universe's only hope, a rag-tag bunch of survivors from every planet in the galaxy. At the enemies' head is your old ally Lothar Rendain.**

To play, it feels like a MOBA mixed with an FPS, with *Wildstar*'s looks and pure *Borderlands* combat. It's got 25 playable characters at launch, which is pretty huge for a multiplayer FPS, but not so many for a MOBA. However, only eight of those characters are unlocked from the start – you need to get the rest by playing through the singleplayer/ co-op missions. On top of the core PvP, it's got a story mode that can be played in co-op, which gets you used to the characters and helps you to understand the fictional set-up.

The co-op mission my team played – called Algorithm – has you attempting to defeat the AI ISIC by fighting his spider sentry. ISIC, like every other AI in the *Battleborn* universe, has gone senile. As we battled endless streams of (not very interesting) robot guards, ISIC was pleading with and threatening his giant spider robot Geoff, who'd gone a bit bonkers from boredom and wanted to be called The Spider King. Throughout the long fight Geoff roleplays a spider, to ISIC's increasing frustration. "We love to laugh," says creative director Randy Varnell, "and

ISIC WAS PLEADING WITH AND THREATENING HIS GIANT SPIDER ROBOT, GEOFF

we have some pretty funny guys on the team." The singleplayer felt midway between *Borderlands* and a *WoW* raid – lots of chaff to churn through, with the odd weak-point-focused boss battle.

Yet the core is the PvP, where you battle 5v5 in three different modes. I tried the familiar Capture – a simple three-point capture-and-hold – and Meltdown – where the two teams are competing to sacrifice your minions to another rogue AI, recapturing the frantic joy of early *TF2*. The final mode, which I didn't try, is Incursion, where teams compete to destroy each other's spider minions.

DECEPTIVE APPEARANCE

Despite the handsome polish and intuitive combat, I still occasionally felt lost with *Battleborn*, as every character played so differently. For example, Rath and Phoebe are both slight, sword-equipped characters seemingly designed for rapid damage. Yet Rath is more of a direct Samurai type, moving fast on his feet and having only strong, short-ranged attacks. Phoebe, in contrast, is as deadly but much slower and relies on a teleport to pick off isolated, damaged or long-ranged enemies.

PLAYED IT

Inside the game, as you gain experience from captures and kills, you level up, to a maximum of ten, each time choosing between two different upgrades. The two branches are clearly labelled, so you know each one contributes to a certain playstyle – for example, the fast attack Gundam-alike Caldarius has Mobile Armour as one of his branches and Shock Trooper as the other. This levelling up can happen really fast – in one not too-unusual minute, where I killed a handful of enemies and capped two points, I levelled up three times.

Outside of the battles, your characters have custom loadouts, which you plug three pieces of gear into, doing things like reducing cooldowns. These gears stack, but take resources to power-up in-match, and some are restricted to particular factions, others drop in-game while others have to be bought using in-game currency.

Battleborn, on this impression, doesn't quite reach *TF2*'s levels of zaniness, but it does feel like a fun, hugely varied heir to *Borderlands*, taking a nicely different slant on a familiar theme. That's no bad thing.
Dan Griliopoulos

You wouldn't know it to look at him but Marquis is an effective sniper.

Of the 25 playable characters, no two play the same.

Montana's gun is almost as big as he is.

There's both simplicity and depth to the fighting.
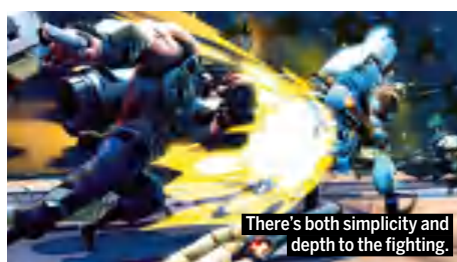
SHOOTING STARS

UK studio Foundry 42 wants to bring *Star Citizen*'s
sandbox spirit to its ambitious FPS campaign,
SQUADRON 42. Can they pull it off?

By Andy Kelly
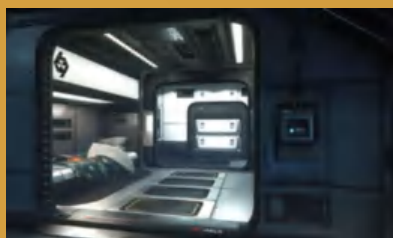
RIGHT: When creating ships and stations, the designers think about how people would really live in these places if they existed.

When I first heard about *Squadron 42, Star Citizen*'s FPS campaign, I was expecting *Call of Duty* in space. A parade of cinematic set-pieces with an all-star cast and a handful of linear missions. The appetiser to *Star Citizen*'s main course. But as I spoke to the talented team developing it – Wilmslow-based Foundry 42 – it became clear that they're attempting something far more ambitious.

Lead level designer Mike Barclay, whose previous work includes the *Crysis* series, tells me about *Squadron 42*'s design philosophy. He cites games such as *Thief* and *Deus Ex* – particularly the way their freeform design encourages creative play – as a big inspiration. Foundry 42 wants the FPS component of *Star Citizen* to mirror the open-ended, player-driven design of its space sandbox.

Barclay loads up a level to give me an example. We're in space, and I see a station orbiting a colossal gas giant. Taking control of the camera, he flies us towards the station, and we transfer seamlessly inside. Suddenly, with no loading breaks, we're in an FPS level. This smooth transition from space to detailed interiors is an important part of *Squadron 42*, which lets you both fly ships and travel on foot.

We pull back out into space, and Barclay explains his open-ended approach to mission design. He considers the game's levels as being more like multiplayer maps than linear mazes that the player is funnelled through. He spins the camera around the base, showing me several different entry points, some stealthy, some noisy.

There's a landing pad, but if I land the enemies guarding the station will see me and go into high alert. Which is fine, if I want an action experience. If I want to avoid combat, I can get close enough to avoid their scanners, eject from my ship, float over, and slip quietly into an airlock. That's just two examples, but Barclay says every level will offer multiple ways to enter, exit, and complete objectives.

If you cause a ruckus, enemies will call in reinforcements, but they won't magically appear from what Barclay calls a 'monster closet'. They'll be nearby, in ships, and will fly in to help. But if you manage to sneak onto the base quietly, you might be able to take over its AA guns and blast that backup out of the sky, leaving the base helpless as you begin your assault. This kind of systemic design is what defines some of the best games on PC, and it's encouraging to see Foundry 42 embracing it here.

FINAL FRONTIER

Squadron 42 will take place in a small area of *Star Citizen*'s overall galaxy – but that's 'small' in a galactic sense. It's a massive chunk of space, and, the team promises, completely open. They say you'll be able to fly freely between stations and star systems, pursuing both the main story and secondary, optional missions. As Barclay gives me a tour of the level I can see markers on the vast starfield behind it, indicating distant worlds. This is to make moving around such an enormous space a lot easier for the developers.

Large spaces like this are designed to encourage players to play tactically.

RIGHT: Some stations are built into asteroids, while others orbit planets. Each offers multiple ways to infiltrate and exfiltrate.

Barclay also talks briefly about so-called 'secondary stories' that will populate the open world. These self-contained narratives will, he says, be open to interpretation, comparing them to The Chinese Room's post-apocalyptic *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*. He won't elaborate further on this, and gives no specific examples, but it certainly piques my interest. It's amazing just how many different ideas they're trying to squeeze in.

I do wonder how the hell they're going to build all this. There are 200+ people making *Star Citizen*, but they're making a gigantic space sim *as well as* an FPS. I ask lead environment artist Ian Leyland, who reveals a secret. Exteriors and interiors in *Squadron 42* are made from what they call kits. Every structure you see is made of a relatively small selection of parts— walls, vents, doors, windows, etc. But you'd never know it, thanks to the

Bigger ships have massive interiors you can explore.

talent of the level designers, and things like lighting and set dressing.

Leyland brings up a near-finished level – a miles-long space station in the middle of an asteroid field – and tells me that it was made entirely using the kit he showed me earlier. It's amazing, and I can't believe it's composed of snapped-together pieces. Thanks to this solution, designers can easily alter the layout of levels, too.

SHIP SHAPE

Spaceships will obviously be a crucial feature. I took some time on my tour of the studio to see a few of these being designed. An amazing amount of work goes into them. If your ship is under attack, the lights will flicker, and smoke and sparks burst from the interior. On larger ships, this means you'll have to navigate through the chaos to reach engineering and repair the damage.

It was mentioned several times that development of features for both *Star Citizen* and *Squadron 42* are, in a lot of cases, simultaneous. For example, the flight model will be developed by the *Star Citizen* team then implanted into the FPS campaign. But I'm not sure how much crossover there is in terms of purchased ships, and whether you'll be able to play using your own personal hangar of spacecraft. As it's a separate story, and you aren't playing as the same character, it seems unlikely.

RIGHT:
Thanks to CryEngine, the artists can use realistic light and shadow to give each level its own personality.

WHO ARE THE UEE?

The faction you work for in Squadron 42

The UEE, or United Empire of Earth, is kind of like the British Empire, but in space. For two hundred years they've been expanding, colonising planets, and spreading their influence. They operate a vast repository of information, available to all species, called The Ark. Think Wikipedia, but infinitely bigger. And after controversial terraforming projects, which in one case wiped out an entire planet, they've begun work on Synthworld: a technology that allows barren, rocky planets to become livable.

Squadron 42 boasts a cast of motion-capped actors including Gary Oldman, Mark Hamill and Gillian Anderson. Between the more open-ended missions, there'll be a cinematic storyline to follow that's more in line with traditional, linear first-person shooters. These enclosed set-pieces will, if all goes to plan, slot neatly into the sandbox, and feel like a natural part of your progression through the game.

As much of what happens as possible will be viewed through the player's eyes. Your home is a vast capital ship that's like an spacefaring aircraft carrier – think the Battlestar Galactica – and you'll return here regularly throughout the game. Over time, Foundry 42 want this place to feel like home. You'll learn its layout, the routines of its crew, and the personalities of your comrades. On a number of occasions they compared *Squadron 42* to the *Wing Commander* series, but on a much grander scale.

CHAT SHOW

The Foundry 42 team is working on a conversation system that will, they say, see you forging meaningful relationships with the cast – and not always positive ones. But this won't be relayed by some kind of binary love/hate meter; instead, you'll have to determine how much, or little, someone likes you through their

You won't just be shooting people. Sometimes you get to talk to them too.

performance. Insanely high-res character models, motion-capture, and a talented cast of veteran actors should help convey the nuance required for this to work.

But here's the thing. I didn't see or play any of this. *Squadron 42* seems to still be very much in the early stages of development, and I wasn't shown a working build. Everything I saw was in the CryEngine editor or described verbally by one of the developers. The concept is fantastic – a game that combines an open

world, a cinematic story, and a deep FPS – but it remains to be seen whether they can actually pull it off.

The team at Foundry 42 are highly talented, so I'm optimistic, but cautious, too. They've taken on one hell of a task. Often when I visit game studios the room is filled with a quiet murmur, but when I walked into Foundry 42 there was a genuine buzz in the air. These people are clearly hugely excited to be working on this project. Let's hope this translates into something that lives up to the ferocity of their ambition. ∎

THE FOUNDRY 42 TEAM HAVE TAKEN ON ONE HELL OF A TASK

STAR POWER

Creating a spiritual successor to
WING COMMANDER.

By Chris Thursten

Star Citizen creator Chris Roberts directs Mark Hamill on set.

I n June I spent two days at The Imaginarium motion capture studio at Ealing Studios, London. Founded in 2005 by actor Andy Serkis, it has been used for Avengers: Age of Ultron and Star Wars: The Force Awakens. It is also where *Squadron 42*'s substantial narrative component is being pieced together, using a cast that includes Mark Hamill, John Rhys-Davies, Gary Oldman, Gillian Anderson, Mark Strong, Andy Serkis and many others.

By the time I arrive filming has been progressing, on and off, for several months. Mark Hamill and John Rhys-Davies are working through what is left of their parts, and the production as a whole is coming to a close. It is the first time I have seen what over $100 million in funding looks like. That number can be difficult to parse, if you're not a big-budget game producer. In Ealing, I learned that it looks like a lot of very expensive cameras, skintight suits covered in ping-pong balls, and a cast of top-flight actors.

Bolted onto *Squadron 42*'s open-ended structure is a scripted narrative told through conversations in the open world and story missions. That world-class motion-capture rig is being used to map the likenesses of the cast into the game, striking for the sense that you're inside a sci-fi TV show. This is a modern way of achieving what *Wing Commander* struck for in the 1990s. FMV is gone, but Hamill and Rhys-Davies are back. They're no longer Christopher Blair or Paladin (and the aliens are no longer men in giant cat costumes) but this really does feel like a spiritual successor.

"Right from the beginning it was something I wanted to do," Chris Roberts says. "It's fun – I haven't done this in a game for quite a long time. We can take modern technology, fuse it with great acting... take it up a level, like *Wing Commander* took it up before."

I find out while I'm there that Roberts and both actors became friends during the production of *Wing Commander*. For Mark Hamill, returning was easy. "I never expected to do this again with Chris specifically, but I had such a great time the first time around," he tells me. "When he asked, I didn't need to see the script. I said 'count me in!' Of course my agent said, 'you didn't tell him that, did you? Play hard to get for God's sake!'"

ACTING UP

Hamill plays Lt. Commander Steve 'Old Man' Colton, a veteran pilot and the player's mentor. I watch Hamill record conversations and dogfight dialogue, and every story sequence ends with him barking a series of orders for the player to get into the next elevator or get to the next ship. "He's a blunt guy, a lifer," Hamill says. "They say he doesn't teach people as much as hammer them into shape, but he's a true believer in the cause. My father was in the Navy, I knew a lot of guys like this – lifers – no-nonsense guys. Sometimes resentful of the more educated college boys."

I'm there for the filming of several conversations between Old Man and

RIGHT: Performance capture means in-game characters will mirror every subtlety the actor puts into the role.

Star Citizen
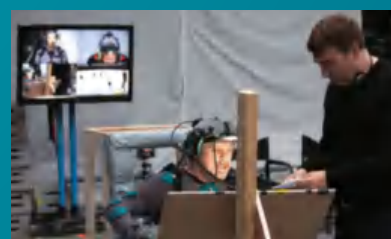
MAKING HISTORY

John Rhys-Davies inadvertently comes up with a better Assassin's Creed 3

JRD: I'm very interested in the way that this is going to go after this game. I can see that you could develop whole scenarios to work out... how the American Revolution could have gone. You could be talking to all those great fathers of the American Revolution. Or you could be gaming World War I or World War II, or the Cuban Missile Crisis. Learning how complex real-life situations interact. It would be a great training ground for would-be diplomats, military people, teachers... anybody, really!

Which of those would you want do, personally?

JRD: Well, I love the American Revolution. I think they were the most extraordinary bunch of people on the planet, actually, outside Periclean Athens. Tom Paine. Ben Franklin. Washington. Jefferson. There are fifteen, twenty of those who would be giants in any age. To be in with Lord North and the King, working out at various points... 'no, we've got to draw the line there'. What if you didn't draw the line there? What scenario would have enabled the colonies to remain within the Empire? Was there one? Is there one? Probably not, really, but wouldn't it be wonderful to game it?

Rhys-Davies' character, Graves, a former Navy colleague now working as a security chief for a private mining rig. Rhys-Davies describes Graves to me as "adrift in civvie street": capable but a little compromised, cautious but willing to be dragged – by Old Man and the player – back into action. It's fascinating watching the two actors work. Rhys-Davies is tall and highly charismatic, dropping in and out of Graves' Scottish brogue as he jokes with the crew. Hamill is focused and attentive. Colton's scowl falls across his face at the start of each take and lingers there for a while afterwards.

In the studio, scenes are played out on a grey mat covered in markings, with wooden frames and scaffolds standing in for desks, elevators and consoles. I watch Hamill record lines from the 'cockpit' of his 'spaceship', really a wooden chair that looks like an unimaginative child's soapbox racer. The first time I saw Mark Hamill he was sitting in a hand-crafted X-Wing cockpit: the cultural and technological road from that image to this one is fascinating. While the motion-capture sets are rudimentary – even a little silly – the performances are rendered in real time onto monitors surrounding the stage. On these, I can see the detailed model of the ship Hamill is in, get a sense of the lighting and the mood.

It's strange to see what the computer sees. It isn't their image that is being recorded, but their *presence* – and not even fully that, as the real-life height difference between Hamill and Rhys-Davies is removed and body shapes are changed. It feels like some intangible essence of the real actors is being beamed into the game.

"You need the emotion, you need the performance," Roberts says. "A lot

These helmets might look silly, but they'll bring the game's characters to life.

RIGHT: The helmet camera can pick up even the smallest muscle movements, making for a believeable end result.

"Somebody on set today held up a sign that made me laugh," Hamill says. "It said, 'I love the way you act like you know what you're doing'. I thought 'boy, does she have my number'. It's like being a child again, playing Robin Hood in your backyard. It's all pretending."

Rhys-Davies agrees. "There we are, with our suits full of these little pimples, and these planks of wood, going 'RIGHT! THEY'RE COMING! KEEP YOUR HEAD DOWN! QUICK SHOTS!'"

Neither actor plays games regularly, but talking to both I get a sense of their interest in the medium and the way it can tell stories. Rhys-Davies is excited by the potential for games to train doctors, soldiers, and diplomats, to allow for the simulation of history. Hamill is interested in the way acting can provide a reactive backdrop to the player's actions. "You're part of this gigantic puzzle, in a way. You're providing each little piece so that the player can put together their own scenario. I find that fascinating."

They express infectious enthusiasm for the project and for working with Chris Roberts. "Once you ask the technical people to show you the images, you are filled with awe," Rhys-Davies says. "I mean, a spaceship

> ## "HE'S RIGHT ON THE CUTTING EDGE AGAIN WITH THIS ONE"

a kilometre long. A mining station five, six, seven kilometres." He pauses so dramatically I almost laugh out loud. "Our dreams will have to be pretty big to keep up with the size of *space*, though, won't they?"

Star Citizen and *Squadron 42* warrant a little scepticism, to the extent that any massively ambitious crowd-funded production does, but the project as a whole seems much more real to me, coming away from Ealing. When will we play it? I don't know – but I'm more confident that we will, particularly in the case of *Squadron 42*. After all, these three people have already made a game like this before.

"It was a very interesting experience last time around," Rhys-Davies says. "You had the sense that it was state-of-the-art, and there was the slight question of whether it would work or not – and it worked, and it worked brilliantly."

"This one has its own feel," Hamill adds. "It's still as much fun, but what was cutting-edge a couple of decades ago probably looks antiquated to modern-day game players." He gestures to Chris Roberts. "He's right on the edge again with this one."

"Dragging two bewildered actors with him," Rhys-Davies adds. ■

of the technology is just having tools that allow you take that from the real world, and map it into the digital world where people can look at it from different angles. It really does look like we're back being five years old again, pretending to fly spaceships and blow stuff up – but trust me. It'll all look really good at the end of the day."

NEW TRICKS

A production like this changes the way the actors ordinarily work, but both have taken to it positively.

"This is really stripping it down to basics," Hamill says. "It's very equalising to see everyone dressed exactly the same way – it doesn't matter if you're a principal player or a background artist. You spend a lifetime on movie sets, doing television and what-not, and you think you know something. Here you're going back and learning it all over again."

"It's like being back in school," says Rhys-Davies. "You come along and think 'eh, I've done a few films, I know what I'm doing' and you get there and very patiently your director has to spell it out to you."

Mark Hamill's character will fight by your side in space battles.

This is the complex setup required to capture the cast's performances.

RIGHT: Chris Roberts has a background in the film business, so this isn't his first time dealing with directing and scripting.

Sid Meier

On **CIVILIZATION** burnout and the enduring nature of PC gaming. *By Phil Savage*

Sid Meier has been part of the games industry for 30 years. He's the founder of Firaxis and the creator of the *Civilization* series, and as such, Firaxicon – held this October in Baltimore – is ultimately a tribute to his legacy. Nevertheless, he was rarely seen out on the convention floor. I got the chance to spend some brief time with him during the day. We talked about *Civilization*, its many designers, and the modern PC gaming scene.

With the *Civ* series, your name is still on the product. Do you still feel a strong sense of connection to it?

Yeah, I'm really proud of the game that we make and that we continue to build on. I'm amazed. I had no idea back in the day that it would still be around. I think we're coming up on the 25th anniversary of the original game.

It's kind of informed Firaxis as a company, and our approach to strategy. It's created an approach to games which is really gratifying for me to see. And to see people taking their own liberties with it is fun. I have the luxury of watching all that happen, and talking with people. But when it gets to the hard work of actually doing it? It's, "I've got to go. Got to run." I get to work on other things. But I'm super happy with the way things have evolved.

For every *Civ*, you've brought on a new lead designer to add their own ideas. Has that been a deliberate move?

Um, yes and no. [Laughs] Once you've done a *Civ* game, you're kind of burnt out for a while. I discovered this after I did the first *Civ* game. I poured everything I could into that game, and then for somebody to say, "let's now do *Civ II*..." Well, you know, all my good ideas are in *Civ I*. Do you want all my bad ideas in *Civ II*?

So bringing in a new person is almost mandatory, because *Civ* has got so much stuff in it that you kind of pour everything you can into that game. Then somebody else will come along, and say, "oh, these are the ideas that I had when I was coming up with this." So a new person brings along some new ideas. That's really been part of what's kept *Civ* moving forward and with a freshness each time, is that there have been new people working on it. But we have occasionally offered the designer – the previous designer – the opportunity to do the next *Civ*, and often it's like "nooo." [Laughs]

Former *Civ* designers are coming back to the genre. Soren Johnson with *Offworld Trading Company*, Jon Shafer with *At The Gates*...

Yeah, to see what Soren is doing and Jon and the others, it's cool. I think there is something about making a *Civ* game. You learn a lot about making games, and then you can take that to other topics or genres. But yeah, I think we've been fortunate to have some really talented people work on *Civ* games and then go on to do other things.

With recent *Civ*s, fans seem unsure at first and then, as the DLC comes in and the expansions, they get behind it. Is that inevitable, or to do with the way Firaxis works?

I don't know the answer to that question. I'd like to think it's because we do try some things that are innovative. And *Civ* players have kind of invested a lot of hours into, you know, *Civ X*. When *Civ X+1* comes along, it's got some new things in it. They have to kind of rethink or restart over again in some way to play.

I think that it's great that the community is willing to give it a try and then, as we get the feedback from them, we can turn that back into the game. Bring out expansions or DLC or things that can make the game even better.

I guess I'm looking at the bright side in terms of people really feeling that we've committed to making these

LEFT: Square tiles were chosen because hexes were thought to denote hardcore strategy.

ABOVE: *Civ II* featured a shift in perspective, and a new design lead, Brian Reynolds.

budgets that really require some confidence that your idea is going to work; and the indie world where it's almost like everything's already been done and you've really got to find a brand new way to do things. I think that's where a lot of new things are being tried for that reason. Some work, some don't. But it's a pretty innovative time, given the mobile world, the indie world, what's happening with triple-A games, and development systems like Unity that allow more people to make games.

In terms of the quantity, the number of games that are being made these days, you know, it's probably the most games ever in the industry. So it's certainly a very alive industry. We've talked about the death of PC gaming many, many times, but it hasn't happened yet.

On the 'death of PC gaming' thing: Firaxis has done the occasional console game, like *Civilization Revolution*, but now it seems like you're focusing on the PC. Is that true?
Well, it depends whether we can bring the fun of the game across on that platform. Some platforms work well, and sometimes a platform is not as appropriate. We're not opposed to consoles or whatever. It's just, like, when you've got a map, when you've got the amount of information that we generally are giving you to play, PC works really well for that kind of thing. Other platforms sometimes work and sometimes are not as appropriate.

In *Civ*, we're asking you to sit there probably for 20 hours to play. It's really a case of where can we provide the experience that we're trying to provide. Where's it going to work.

What is it about PC gaming at the moment that excites you? What are you enjoying and looking forward to?
I still love to make games. Being able to do that and work on games is what gets me up in the morning. I think it's two things. It's the creativity of it that appeals to me, and all the people that work at Firaxis. I'm not sure what I'm going to do day-to-day. What is it that I'm going to make? How is this game going to be better at the end of the day than when I started? Seeing that unfold, I think, is part of the fun. And then, you know, at an event like this you get that sense that it's not just me enjoying this process. It's creating something that other people are going to enjoy, and as long as we can continue to do that I think that's kind of our goal. To make sure the people that are working at Firaxis are fulfilled and allowed to be creative, and that their creativity is something that brings fun to people. To players. ◼

"ONCE YOU'VE DONE A *CIV* GAME, YOU'RE KIND OF BURNT OUT FOR A WHILE"

games as good as they can be; who will spend the time, whether it's one or two expansions or whatever, to get it. We believe that the games as they're released are awesome, but it turns out they could be even a little more awesome if we work on them some more.

In the talk earlier you spoke about how 'the rules' were much less codified when you started out. Do you think creative experimentation is lacking in PC gaming now?
I think there's lots of experimentation. We have this kind of two-tiered world now, with triple-A games with

LEFT: Soren Johnson headed up *Civ IV*. For many, it's the best in the series.

RIGHT: *Civilization: Beyond Earth* wasn't the *Alpha Centauri* successor fans wanted.

THE 20 BEST FIRST-PERSON SHOOTERS

You feel the urge to shoot things in the head, be they zombies, aliens or realistically animated human soldiers. We can help with that.

By Samuel Roberts and Phil Savage

Shooting things is cool. Our criteria for this list was pretty simple: the guns have to feel good and shooting has to play a prominent role in the game to make the cut. It's why *Dishonored* made the list and none of the *Deus Ex* entries did, for example, or why *Mirror's Edge* didn't make it here either. If they're not primarily about shooting, they're not on this list. Also, we limited each series to one entry. Just because *Far Cry 3* isn't on here, for example, doesn't mean it's not also worthy of your time. Enjoy.

DISHONORED

If you want...
good shooting with your immersive sim

You might have played *Dishonored* purely as a stealth game, just as prod ed Tony Ellis did, denying yourself access to its firearms because you decided it's the most credible way to play. The thing is, firing a gun in *Dishonored* feels really good. The armoury consists of antiquated weapons that feel very satisfying to fire and fit the design aesthetic of the world. Also, they're nice and loud, with pleasing reaction animations from enemies during battle, particularly when you blink up to a Tallboy and open fire. For a game that ultimately punishes you for chaos and killing in various ways, they do make the idea of murdering absolutely everyone incredibly tempting.

METRO 2033

If you want...
well-crafted survival horror misery

In the *Metro* series, mankind survives in the tunnels beneath Moscow, having abandoned the nuclear-irradiated overworld, now infested with mutated creatures. The idea is that ammo is finite, that each stash is precious, and *Metro* walks an interesting line between survival horror and first-person shooter. The guns feel great, but it's the fiction around them, the commitment to such a bleak tone, and the gorgeous environments with just a few signs of human life that you'll remember *Metro* for. Now in a *Redux* version, it's never looked better.

BULLETSTORM

If you want...
arcade-style action

→ *Bulletstorm* is an incredibly well-made score attack shooter that's a little different to everything else on the list. The energy leash, the ability to kick enemies and the fast player movement give you plenty of scope to put together cool, flashy combos and to use your armoury creatively. The sweary, deliberately immature script, put together by comic book writer Rick Remender, matches the over-the-top action perfectly. The only downside is it's still locked behind the infernal Games For Windows Live, and getting it to work at all is an absolute pain in the arse – it could really do with an update or two.

LOVELY PLANET

If you want... **first-person shooting with a difference**

→ With a name like *Lovely Planet*, you may be surprised to learn this isn't a game where you pull off headshots or yank out crossbow bolts from corpses. Because that would be lovely. This is, instead, a shooter where precision matters above everything else, where memorising the maps is all but essential. You have to kill every enemy in every level and navigate through obstacle courses of potential environmental mishaps, and you have to do this across 100 levels. Thanks in part to an unconventional but pretty art style, there's nothing else quite like *Lovely Planet* on PC.

FAR CRY 4

If you want... open-world frolics

The other games in the *Far Cry* series have plenty to recommend them, but *Far Cry 4* is the latest and best. It properly buys into the big and silly, letting you raid bases on elephant back, hang glide, and dangle from gyrocopters. It's the best use of the open-world formula that Ubisoft pretty much applies to all its big games. As a shooter, it's fantastic fun, but it's these extra tools, and how easy it is to find yourself thrown into an absurdly fun and chaotic set-piece, that make this one of the best FPS games around.

CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE

If you want...
well-scripted set-pieces

→ Marking the start of the age of scripted shooters, *CoD4*'s campaign is still a blast even if it isn't that interactive. It jumps between different playable characters in an escalating global conflict, from raiding an enemy ship in the prologue, to the unforgettable 'All Ghillied Up' flashback sequence. *Modern Warfare* still has a small active multiplayer base, too.

TRIBES: ASCEND

If you want...
speed, skill and skiing

→ *Tribes: Ascend*'s best weapons – the ones that make it worth celebrating as a fast paced, high skill competitive FPS – work in tandem with its inimitable traversal to create exhilarating ski-by shootings. Nailing a top-speed kill with a spinfusor, mortar or grenade launcher is a feeling that can't easily be beaten. The game was long thought abandoned, but developer Hi-Rez is now testing the first patch in over two years.

DOOM 2

If you want...
hundreds of ways to play

→ Classic *Doom* feels great. Its movement is fast, but not uncontrollable. Its levels are complex, but not confusing. Its enemies are demonic, but not so tough as to be unaffected by a couple of shotgun blasts. And it's been further elevated by its modding community. More than 20 years later, they're still going strong. You'll find new weapons, new campaigns and total conversions that let you be everything from a pirate to a cartoon square.

LEFT 4 DEAD 2

If you want...
always surprising co-op

→ *Left 4 Dead 2* is an unpredictable and highly replayable co-op zombie shooter, with a huge history of mods behind it, some that swap textures and others that improve key elements like the AI. Want to play through *GoldenEye* levels or a 12-map *Silent Hill* campaign with your friends while mowing down hundreds of infected? Go for it. It doesn't hurt that Valve regularly discounts the game on Steam – and sometimes gives it away.
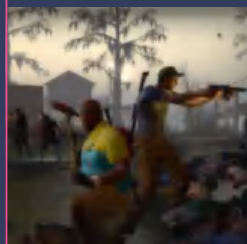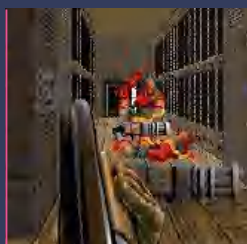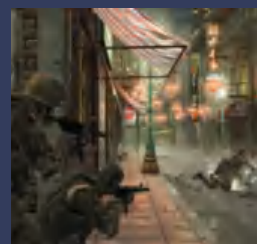
COUNTER-STRIKE: GO

If you want...
complex team-based shooting

→ *Global Offensive* is the clear winner of the *Counter-Strike* wars, and is even challenging *Dota 2* for Steam's highest concurrent playerbase. That's one hell of an achievement for a game that came out three years ago and isn't even free-to-play. As to why, it's probably thanks to the peerless tactical challenge of its competitive mode – a 30-round intense battle of wits, skill and endurance. For those looking for something less extreme, Arms Race and Demolition offer a comparatively more relaxed way to enjoy *Counter-Strike*'s eternal battle between terrorist and counter-terrorist.

ARMA 3

If you want... **military simulation on an insane scale**

→ *Arma 3* is about scale and detail together: it's not just a snapshot of a battle, it's the whole thing. It's the realistic reloading, the helicopters that almost require real-life helicopter pilots to control them, and the damage you sustain from taking an enemy shot. No other first-person shooter offers what *Arma* does, with the same high production values. And as Bohemia gradually builds on the base game with more environments – Tanoa, 100 square kilometres of jungle landscape, is arriving next year as DLC – it becomes a fuller simulation of war.

HALF-LIFE 2

If you want... **one of the best games ever made**

Our number one game in this year's PCG top 100, *Half-Life 2* is worth recommending for a whole bunch of reasons. The variety in its ever-changing levels and presentation of story, for example. But it's also a fantastic shooter, primarily because of the opportunities put in your hands with the Gravity Gun. It's a tool to help you reshape the environment on the fly as you work out the best way to use explosive barrels to dispatch enemies, or to catch grenades and lob them back at the Overwatch. *Half-Life 2* gets so much right, but it starts with world-class combat.

BATTLEFIELD: BAD COMPANY 2

**If you want...
tuned, focused chaos**

→ There's a reason this one felt more explosive than its *Battlefield* successors. It's the setting. By avoiding commercial urban environments, *Bad Company 2*'s smaller, less essential buildings were at the mercy of the Frostbite engine's destructive capabilities. Houses would creak and moan, then collapse in a beautiful moment of panic and chaos. It's best played in Rush mode, which has maps that elegantly funnel players through a gauntlet of destructible chokepoints. Great sound design, too.

TEAM FORTRESS 2

If you want... an ever-changing multiplayer experience

→ As of writing, *Team Fortress 2* has had 525 patches. And yes, a lot of those have been updated localisation files, but plenty have also brought new weapons, items and maps. *Team Fortress 2* exemplifies the idea of multiplayer gaming as a service. That's not the only thing that makes it a great first-person shooter, though. It's also a cleverly crafted, endlessly replayable and deeply engrossing team game. It has nothing as boring as an assault rifle. Instead, its guns are powerful, deadly and situational – rewarding skilled play and tactical movement with lots and lots of kills.

WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER

If you want... big-ass guns

This big, silly revival of *Wolfenstein* has inventive level design, a daft but entertaining story based on an alternate WWII history, and guns that feel amazing to fire. It also made dual-wielding an exciting idea for the first time in about a decade. You battle boilerplate robo-dogs, you fight Nazis on the Moon. The feel of the machine guns and shotguns is spot-on.

The former Starbreeze leads who formed MachineGames reinterpreted *Wolfenstein* in a way that made it exciting and new both for the series' existing audience and for those gamers coming in fresh. This big, chunky shooter is so much more than just a retro pastiche, offering variety and production values you rarely get to enjoy in singleplayer games these days.

QUAKE III

If you want...
fast run-and-gunning

→ This is a shooter so fast you could earn a multikill in the time it takes to read this sentence. It forces you to build the muscle memory needed to navigate its tight corridors. The reward is a frenetic shooter that favours those able to perfectly execute their strafe-jumps through the piles of pick-ups. Speed has a dramatic effect on the gunplay, too. It's no good being able to fly through an arena if you can't hit your equally speedy opponents.
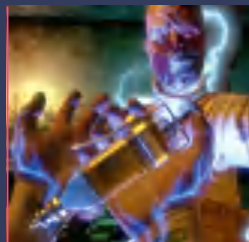
BIOSHOCK

If you want...
shooting with a side of strategy

→ You go from firing a pistol and zapping splicers with electricity to being a full-on badass, deploying traps, turning enemies against each other and finding the optimal way to navigate increasingly tough battles. That layer of strategy can be very empowering, and the guns, particularly the shotgun and '20s machine gun, feel loud and brutal. Also, it turns out that grenade launchers and bees are great things to fire at Big Daddies.

STALKER: CALL OF PRIPYAT

If you want...
open-world misery

→ *Stalker*'s atmospheric open-world setting balances tension, terror and, ultimately, isolation. If you're looking for a power fantasy, look elsewhere. The guns are basic and utilitarian. They're also vital. They're tools that, if you're extremely lucky, will get you to your next objective – whatever that may be.

UNREAL TOURNAMENT

If you want...
more fast run-and-gunning

→ The guns, the maps, the movement. The original *UT* was such a satisfying multiplayer shooter. "Unstoppable!" yells the voiceover as you turn enemies into chunks with the rocket launcher, or pound through an opponent with the minigun. The armoury is perfect, the over-the-top sci-fi theme nicely done – this remains a classy multiplayer shooter, followed by a number of mostly great sequels.
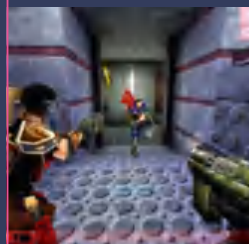
HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED

If you want... **sandbox-set shooting with vehicles**

This primarily console-based shooter came to PC in the early '00s with online multiplayer support that the original lacked. While the GameSpy servers for *Halo* were shut down in 2014, Bungie helped keep the game online. Multiplayer aside, *Halo* has a still amazing campaign of sandboxy gunfights across cool sci-fi environments with plenty of vehicles and great set-pieces. And, dare we say it, a pretty cool if familiar premise. Its shotgun, assault rifle and sniper rifle in particular have satisfying feedback – Bungie understands how to make guns feel great. It's not impossible to get it working on modern Windows operating systems, either, although you will need the disc as it's not available digitally.

NETWORK

The latest from the friendly PC Gamer community

Check in with our servers, guilds and battlegroups. Want to play with us? Join our Steam group!

GET INVOLVED

Our *Guild Wars 2* community lives on EU's Desolation server. Don't worry about that too much, though. Thanks to the megaserver system, you can play with us no matter the world you pick. To join, head to www.pcggw.com, and click on the 'Join Us' tab. One of our council members should invite you in shortly after.

THE INDEX

MINECRAFT
Server
85.236.100.145
Port 26665
Link
www.pcgukmc.
enjin.com

WORLD OF WARCRAFT
Server
Steamwheedle Cartel
Link
www.pcgwow.
enjin.com

STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC
Server
The Red Eclipse
Link
www.pcg-mi.
enjin.com

EVE ONLINE
Link
http://pcge.
enjin.com

The squatters don't last long.

We have lots of pumpkins, for some reason.

The guildies gather.

WHERE THE HEART IS

We've got a new space in **GUILD WARS 2: HEART OF THORNS**. You should move in.

PC Gamer has a new home in *Guild Wars 2*. It's a prime piece of arid landscape, within walking distance of a dangerous and hostile jungle. Enterprising estate agents would refer to it as a "fixer-upper". Lost Precipice was introduced in *Heart of Thorns*, *Guild Wars 2*'s first expansion. It's a Guild Hall – one of two that have been added to the game – giving us (its new inhabitants) a chance to socialise, organise, and gain access to a variety of buffs, bonuses and benefits.

Of course, any new piece of real estate comes at a cost. In our case, it wasn't money – rather, we had to

evict its previous tenants. Lost Precipice is filled with Mordrem, and it took a coordinated effort to defeat them. It's a fun fight, taking the form of a map-wide skirmish against multiple waves of enemies. Each wave is made up of four bosses, who spawn randomly across the map. If even one of these is left standing when the timer runs out, the toxicity of the map rises. Let it get too high, and everybody fails.

It would be far more exciting to say it was a close-fought battle. It wasn't, though. PCG is a sizeable guild and plenty of us turned up to help capture our new digs. Hall acquired, now is a period of

rebuilding and renovation. The first thing on the agenda? A new tavern with a free XP boost.

If you'd like to get involved, simply follow the instructions in the sidebar. We're an active community, regularly getting together in informal groups for Fractal dailies and World vs World roaming. We also run Guild Missions twice a week: every Thursday and Sunday. Over the coming months, we'll continue to upgrade our new community space. You can help with that, too: our Treasury is accepting donations of any items and materials its members can spare. ◼

Phil Savage

SEND ✉

You write in, we write back. A free Steam key for _The Talos Principle_ and DLC for the month's star letter!

Especially Jon Blyth

I read PC Gamer for two reasons: firstly as a guide to which PC games and hardware I should buy; secondly for entertainment. I can't complain at all about your reviews as guides. You give sensible, fair reviews that I generally agree with. However, sensible, fair reviews of middling games and hardware are boring as shit. I like reading long reviews on high-scoring games, even if they're not something I care about. Even more so, I love reading reviews of genuinely bad games. In fact, I think your writers are more entertaining when panning something dreadful (especially Jon Blyth).

I suggest you have more reviews of awful games and hardware. Let your writers express their disdain and pity for these piss-poor efforts. Keep covering the good stuff, but include more rubbish stuff, as it'll be properly entertaining. ∎
Drew Littler

Schadenfreude can be fun, but there are more releases than ever these days. With limited pages, it makes sense for us to focus on those games we want to celebrate. That said, if you do enjoy low scores, page 68 is going to be a treat. PCG

Play spot the Mad Men cast in _L.A. Noire_ like Jamie.

Peggy's sister

After reading Andy's piece about _L.A. Noire_ in PCG 285, I thought I'd share my experience with the game. I recently started watching the TV show Mad Men on Netflix, and every time I saw the character Ken Cosgrove – played by Aaron Staton – I kept getting the urge to return to _L.A. Noire_ (he also plays the main character, Detective Cole Phelps). Upon returning to the game, I discovered a million different characters are played by a good chunk of the Mad Men cast. I found it really cool to keep recognising different people. "Oh, look, there's Peggy's sister," or, "That's the comedian guy." It added an extra something to my enjoyment of the game and the show, and also indicates where some more of that $50 million budget went. ∎
Jamie Morrison

The downside is that you can spend so long thinking, 'Oh, it's _that_ guy,' that you wind up missing the fact that his character has been carving the words 'It was me, I did the murder' into a corpse. PCG

Horrified to find

I recently returned to PC gaming after a stint on Xbox and PlayStation. I was horrified to find most games are now controlled by Steam or Origin. Why did we let this happen? Playing from your PC was meant to be unhindered by external forces, with content that was exceptional. Now we get a fancy chat client and not being able to play a game without buying from these sites. ∎
Norman Langford

Sorry, Norman. We all had a big meeting and decided we were fed up with individually downloading patches from FilePlanet. On the plus side, Steam's is a particularly fancy chat client. PCG

✉ I'm still able

I only recently got into PC gaming. First I got Steam, then I went to Scotland and discovered a mysterious magazine called PC Gamer. I had to read it. Since then, my subscription to PC Gamer has been the main reason I'm still able to enjoy gaming – even though I can only play on a five-year-old laptop with a bust screen. (My framerate struggles to reach numbers higher than 39 and my resolution has gone to hell.)

So thank you from the bottom of my heart for writing such amusing articles with such pretty, colourful screenshots. It keeps me motivated to keep playing laggy, 32-bit games every day and somehow still think they're beautiful.
Laura Hansens

WINNER!

Thanks for the kind words, Laura. We're glad you're able to enjoy games, despite the obvious limitations of an ageing, busted up laptop. And while we can't send you a new PC, we can give you a copy of _The Talos Principle_ and its DLC to enjoy as best you can. PCG

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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

Wherever possible, we finish a game before finalising the review. We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of the reviews section is to help you make buying decisions.

ALPHAS & BETAS

This means we'll review any released alpha, beta or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently buy. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time in their current state.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be hours-long new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. Either way, if we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-10% A game of absolutely no value. Are you playing one of these games? Take 3d6 emotional damage.
Examples *Big Brother*

11%-39% Yikes. Technically broken, or so fundamentally flawed that it's ultimately not worth any time or money. Bad.
Examples *The War Z*

40%-49% This game is functional, but majorly flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Firefall*, *Star Trek*

50%-59% Mediocre. If it has any interesting ideas, they don't work well. Might suffer from bugs or technical issues.
Examples *Primordia*, *Painkiller: Hell & Damnation*

60%-69% An interesting idea poorly expressed, or a derivative idea executed averagely. Comes with caveats.
Examples *SimCity*, *Mortal Kombat X*, *Blood Bowl 2*

70%-79% Good, but not a classic. This score is a recommendation, just not a glowing one.
Examples *Broken Age*, *Shadowrun Returns*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance.
Examples *Elite: Dangerous*, *Soma*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Ahead of its time and important to PC gaming.
Examples *MGS V*, *GTA V*, *Undertale*

95%-98% This is far and away one of the best games we've ever played, and we recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2*, *Minecraft*, *Spelunky*

99%-100% Advances the human species. Life-changing. A masterpiece and more. Actively boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews

About last Knight

When Warner Bros pulled *Batman: Arkham Knight* from sale in June, I pictured a new era of publishers treating their PC ports with respect. Now it's back, and while Andy didn't encounter too many performance problems, others haven't been so lucky. The game, it seems, is still in a bit of a state. That's a shame, because in all other respects Rocksteady's final *Arkham* is a well-crafted action brawler.

Also this month, I've been digging into *Guild Wars 2: Heart of Thorns*. It's a fine expansion to what could well be the best MMO there is. Alternatively, if you feel life is too fleeting to enjoy an endless online RPG, how about trying *80 Days*? This game utterly charmed the pants off Andy with its blend of sharp writing, intriguing mystery, and lack of forced Batmobile stealth sections.

Phil Savage

PHIL SAVAGE
DEPUTY EDITOR
phil.savage@futurenet.com

LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK

Get in touch via our 'Network' section on page 50, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer

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Specialist in
RPG, MMO
Currently playing
Guild Wars 2: Heart of Thorns
This month
Played MMOs in his dressing gown, to the chagrin of the office.

ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Action, RPG
Currently playing
Batman: Arkham Knight
This month
Wished he could defeat Arkham's main villain: the Batmobile.

ANGUS MORRISON
Specialist in
Adventure, RPG
Currently playing
Sword Coast Legends
This month
Delved deep into a dungeon of crushing mediocrity.

CHRIS LIVINGSTON
Specialist in
Simulation, shanking
Currently playing
Prison Architect
This month
Wasted many biros making a prison tattoo of his dog.

JOE SKREBELS
Specialist in
Action, explosions
Currently playing
Broforce
This month
Took to wearing a bandana and shouting "FREEDOM!" at the HR department.

TYLER WILDE
Specialist in
Adventure, action
Currently playing
Tales from the Borderlands
This month
Successfully avoided Claptrap. Was happier for it.

JON BLYTH
Specialist in
Retro, culture
Currently playing
Quake II
This month
Gave out hugs at the Games Media Awards. "9 out of 10," raved Tom Senior.

Guild Wars 2: Heart of Thorns

"FREQUENTLY BEAUTIFUL AND OCCASIONALLY GORGEOUS"

TAKE ROOT

It's taken three years to get here. Was **GUILD WARS 2: HEART OF THORNS** worth the wait? *By Phil Savage*

First things first: *Heart of Thorns* isn't going to change your mind. If you don't like *Guild Wars 2*'s fast-paced, streamlined combat or distinctive, freeform endgame – some people don't, I have read the internet – this first expansion for the MMO won't magically make ArenaNet's approach any more palatable. If anything, *Heart of Thorns* reassesses and restructures everything that has come before. It moves *Guild Wars 2* into a more expansion-focused phase. It's new, but also the same.

I *do* like *Guild Wars 2*. According to the game, I've spent 728 hours playing it. Thirty days. That's a long time. A whole rabbit could gestate in that period. Or one ninth of a new human being. Despite this, I hadn't played much of the game over the last few months – my interest having waned due to the lack of new content updates in the lead up to this expansion. *Heart of Thorns* has, for the most part, rectified that. It's an enjoyable chunk of entertaining new stuff. Some quibbles aside, it makes *Guild Wars 2* feel exciting and relevant again.

The expansion introduces four new maps in Magus Falls, the area west of the Asuran capital city of Rata Sum. It's a new, primarily jungle-themed region. Picture the Sylvari home of The Grove and Caledon Forest, but darker, less vibrant and more dangerous. Gnarled trees wind up and around. Cliff formations hide labyrinthine underground warrens. Ancient, golden architecture gleams out of dark, foreboding vegetation.

It's frequently beautiful and occasionally gorgeous. As with the rest of *Guild Wars 2*, ArenaNet's art team has done an exemplary job – taking a basic theme and filling it with interesting ideas. The initial exploration phase is a joy. Frequently, I'd be heading to a specific point, only to be distracted by an area that looked fresh and intriguing. During my first visit to the Tangled Depths, a crack in an otherwise plain corridor led down to a wondrously surreal underground expanse.

In fact, the Tangled Depths map as a whole is, visually, an absolute treat – a fascinating intersection between lore and design. Winding paths above ground feed down into cavernous passageways, and down further into much stranger depths. I won't spoil what's down there, but it's a nice surprise for fans of Tyria's history. It's almost a shame that the area looks so good, because in every other respect it's my least favourite part of the expansion. It's confusing to navigate, and filled with enemies that tip past challenging and into infuriating. It was during a fight against one such enemy – a Champion tier bug-thing – that I punched my keyboard in such a way that my computer shut itself down. It was easily my most dramatic accidental ragequit.

These issues will probably be lessened as I grow more familiar with the area, and once I've unlocked all the traversal methods it requires (more on that later). But the other areas feel more instantly and intuitively navigable. Four maps might sound slim for an expansion, but they're big, multilayered affairs. Verdant Brink, *Heart of Thorns'* first map, has you move between the canopy, the floor and the jungle's roots. Bits of the roots, at least. The majority of the undergrowth is a pulsating, deadly mass.

POPULAR MECHANICS

As in *Guild Wars 2*'s other level 80 areas, there are no Renown Heart quests – *Guild Wars 2*'s version of,

> **It's a fascinating intersection between lore and design**

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE

well, quests. Instead, each map is made up of a series of public events that scale based on the number of people who participate. Many are composed of multiple stages that ultimately build into a map-wide metaevent. In Auric Basin, collaborating to activate multiple pylons in each quarter of the map results, eventually, in a huge boss-fight. In these moments, the entire map must work together to jointly take down their section of the boss – using the map chat to organise, plan and execute on the fly.

It often fails, but sometimes everything comes together and your hard work pays off as the map's population congregates in the centre for their reward. It's also a clever approach to MMO design in general – highlighting the massively multiplayer aspect in a way that makes other players a welcome sight, rather than an irrelevance or, worse still, a hindrance. *Guild Wars 2* has always done this, but *Heart of Thorns* draws on ArenaNet's experiments across the last few years of updates. The new maps feel like a logical extension of the approaches found in last year's new zone, The Silverwastes, or the time-limited

MASTERY AND COMMANDER

What to unlock

GLIDING
Get a hang glider, then make it better. Essential and fun.

ITZEL LORE
Learn recreational mushroom use from a local tribe of frogs.

EXALTED LORE
Impress ancient mystical beings in order to buy crap from them.

NUHOCH LORE
"Challenge the Nuhoch champion Belly Floppin' Phil."

Guild Wars 2: Heart of Thorns

Twisted Marionette and Escape From Lion's Arch events from the season before.

So far in my travels, Auric Basin has been the most consistently successful metaevent. Elsewhere, I've made a couple of ultimately doomed attempts on the expansion's final map, Dragon's Stand, and have yet to see anyone even attempt the Tangled Depths. Obviously, it's still early days – it will take the community a little while to get into a consistent rhythm with these huge, demanding tasks. Whether each map's metaevent can stand the test of time is, right now, a question without an answer. (Although, three years later, people are still turning up for Shatterer. And he's pretty boring.)

Unusually for an MMO expansion, *Heart of Thorns* doesn't raise the level cap. It doesn't add any new tiers of gear, either. If you were level 80 before the expansion, you're still at the maximum level now. If you were fully kitted out in ascended armour before the expansion, you've still got the best equipment now. XP gains instead go towards unlocking bonuses in the new masteries system.

MAKING TRACKS

Masteries are a little complicated, but they're central to *Guild Wars 2*'s reworked progression. There are four mastery tracks for the *Heart of Thorns* region, each containing multiple unlocks. By selecting a track, you start earning XP towards it – your progress displayed at the bottom of the screen where the levelling bar used to be. Earn enough XP, and you can purchase the unlock with Mastery Points gained through specific achievements, or collected throughout the new zones.

Heart of Thorns' masteries offer a wide selection of benefits. The gliding track, for instance, enables a hang glider that can be deployed at any time. Later masteries in the track let you ride 'updrafts' found across the new maps, or give unlimited endurance to prevent you from unceremoniously falling out of the air. Other tracks unlock access to specialised merchants, specific daily challenges, warp gates, hidden shortcuts and so forth.

The further into a track you get, the more expensive the masteries become. The first unlock on the gliding track requires 508,000 XP – about twice what it takes to level from 79 to 80. The last, that lets you glide along ley line energy, costs 4,318,000. To unlock *all* of *Heart of Thorns*' masteries, you'll need to earn 49,530,000 XP, or about ten times the amount required to fully level an alt. That, in layman's terms, equals a metric shitload of events. The *Guild Wars 2* community is – and I'm being diplomatic here – conflicted about this fact. But there are a few things that lessen what could otherwise be a serious grind.

Firstly, masteries are account bound. Unlock them for one character, and they're unlocked for all. As with many of the systems introduced to *Guild Wars 2* over the last couple of years, it's extremely alt-friendly. Secondly, most masteries are pitched as quality-of-life upgrades. Most of the ones that unlock traversal options are lower down their respective tracks. Even now, after a week of play, I can glide, ride updrafts and use bouncing mushrooms. I can happily navigate most of each map.

All the same, the implementation isn't perfect. In places the balance feels off. As previously mentioned, ley-line riding is the final unlock of the gliding map, and, without it, there are areas locked off to me. I like exploring, so I balk at the idea of missing out on places because of the high cost to reach them. Worse still, it's not clear which masteries are required to unlock specific activities. I'm currently stalled in my personal story because I didn't have the prerequisite mastery. It's not prohibitively expensive, I just didn't know I needed to have it.

These issues aside, I like the system. *Guild Wars 2* needed a new form of progression, and, without new tiers of gear, this fits the bill nicely. Part of the reason I stopped playing was that everything I needed to acquire seemed a long way off. I didn't have the materials required to craft ascended armour, or forge a legendary weapon. I was stalled, and facing a long road to any meaningful progress. This reintroduces it, both within the expansion itself and in the main game. There's a separate set of mastery tracks for the base game,

> **The gliding track enables a hang glider that can be deployed at any time**

MASTERING THE META
How to beat Auric Basin

1 PYLONS
Switch on the three pylons found on each side of the map. Usually by killing things.

2 CHALLENGES
Unlock powerful armour by completing challenges. *If* you've unlocked the right masteries.

3 BOSS
Attempt to kill one of the four bosses at the same time as the other groups. Fail. Try again.

including increased Fractal rewards, ways to mentor new players, and – at long last – a guaranteed way to earn the precursors that are required to craft legendary weapons.

More importantly, the new traversal methods feel great. The hang glider is a joy to use, and feels so natural that I miss it outside of the expansion maps. I have, on more than one occasion, come close to hurling myself off a cliff – only remembering at the last second that the glider won't deploy. It's a particular problem on the new World vs World map, which is a clever piece of design that utilises special shrines to encourage teams to defend their territory. It also has lots of massive cliffs, and I desperately want to glide off of them.

HERO'S JOURNEY

The second new progression system in *Heart of Thorns* unlocks your character's specialisation – a new trait line that lets each profession wield a new weapon type, and utilise a new game mechanic. These traits are unlocked by earning Hero Points that are specific to each character. Hero Points are unlocked in bundles of ten by completing specific challenges found throughout the new maps. I *was* planning to write about the effort required to fully unlock a character's specialisation trait, but the developers, who have been diligently patching and tweaking the expansion throughout the last week, went and
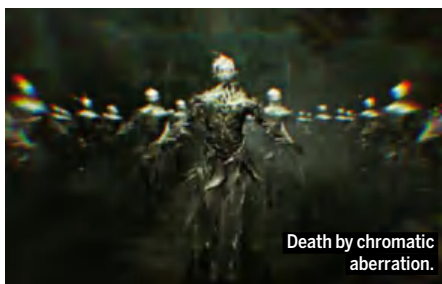
Never bring a doylak to a boss fight.

Updrafts extend your gliding endurance.

Death by chromatic aberration.

"You were right, it *was* more plants."

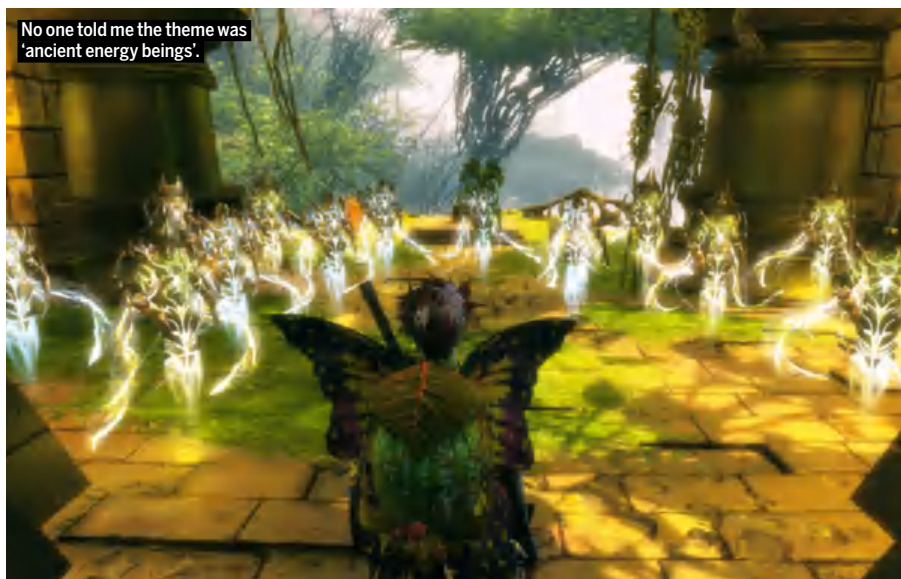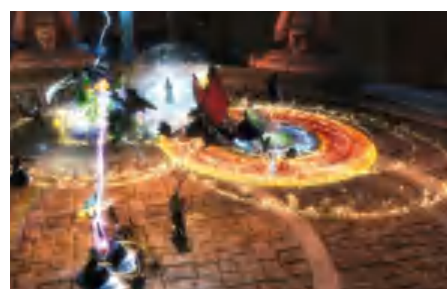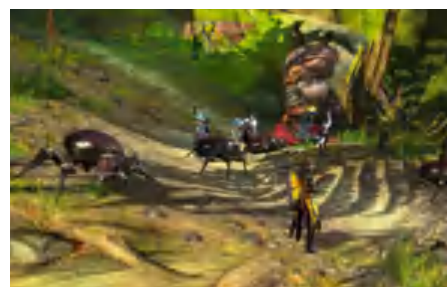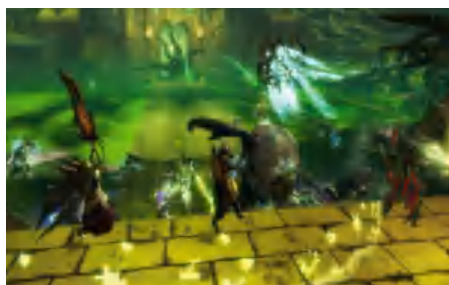There's a monster behind all that, I think.

The chak are a bunch of annoying bug bastards.

There are some interesting story beats.

No one told me the theme was 'ancient energy beings'.

Why do all my house parties end this way?

BLAST FROM THE PAST

The weird, historical attacks of the Revenant

ASSASSIN STANCE
Speed, stabbing and mystical winds.
Shut up, mystical winds are a thing.
Weirdness rating ★★☆☆☆

CENTAUR STANCE
Create a floating stone tablet, then
make it do stuff.
Weirdness rating ★★★★★

DEMON STANCE
Take on conditions, turn them
into damage.
Weirdness rating ★★★★☆

DWARF STANCE
Hammers, hammers and yet more
hammers.
Weirdness rating ⚒⚒⚒⚒⚒

» reduced the total number of Hero Points needed from 400 to 250. One minute I was facing a long, arduous journey. One quick patch later, and I'd filled it all out.

I'm glad, too, because it's great. I play a Thief, whose specialisation is Daredevil. I can still utilise stealth, but the focus is now on endurance – so much so that I've gained a third consecutive dodge roll. I can also customise my dodge to apply a series of crippling conditions, or grant a selection of handy buffs. I've been playing a glass cannon DPS build since the game launched, and so increased evasion is relevant to my interests. Also, I get to thwack things with a staff. It's all extremely gratifying.

I've heard first-hand accounts of similarly enjoyable specialisations, but also that some are more situational. Take the Druid, the new specialisation for the Ranger. It's closer to a support class, designed to help buff and heal allies. Hopefully it won't result in difficult group content relying on a designated healer to get them through. So far, *Guild Wars 2*'s combat has been predicated on the idea that players must largely look after themselves. I suspect the community at large has been more forgiving and friendly because of that.

The other reason the reduction in Hero Point cost was helpful is because getting them was hard. In fact, much of the expansion is. Things

that would have been soloable in the base game now encourage the formation of ad-hoc groups, from the event-based map movement to the many Hero Points that spawn Champions. For the most part, I enjoy the difficulty spike – after years of steamrolling through the open world, it's a welcome change to have to call in reinforcements through map chat. But some of the new enemies are better than others.

I love the design of Arrowheads – hulking reptiles who can down my squishy Thief in a single, powerful attack. They're bulky, slow, and have an attack pattern that rewards those who can respond to and evade its telegraphs. Some beasts, however, aren't as interesting to fight. Smokescales emit an area-of-effect mist that, as long as it remains in that radius, temporarily causes all attacks to miss. They're not even particularly tough, just an inconvenience.

HEART BEATS

This review isn't an exhaustive attempt to dissect each of *Heart of Thorns*' new features. Rather, it's an exploration of what, after a week of play, strikes me as the most notable parts of its design. There's lots more going on. The personal storyline, for instance, which draws on the last two years of 'Living World' updates, and finally adds a little spice to the once saccharine diplomatic relations of the main playable races. In *Heart of*

Heart of Thorns feels distinct from a more traditional expansion

Thorns, the Sylvari are mistrusted – with many having become the jungle dragon's thralls. It provides some much needed tension to proceedings, but only up to a point. It's a bit of a cop out that, if you play a Sylvari character, you're implicitly trusted despite everything that's happening around you.

Elsewhere, there's a new profession – the Revenant – which gains versatility by drawing on the ghostly powers of historical legends. There's a new PvP mode, a reworked Fractal system, and 'Adventures' – a series of repeatable, score attack challenges. There are new, capturable Guild Halls, a new complement of collection achievements, and mini narratives that unfold across events.

In all, it's a lot of stuff. Yet *Heart of Thorns* feels distinct from a more traditional (and more content heavy) MMO expansion. It's possible to look at everything on offer and wonder if it justifies the £35 asking price. I'm not really worried. *Guild Wars 2* doesn't have a subscription, and yet it was one of the most generous MMOs in terms of post-launch content updates. It sounds as if ArenaNet is planning to give *Heart of Thorns* the same treatment, starting soon with the first wing of the game's first raid. The ArenaNet team have spent a lot of time teasing their first foray into raiding, and promise it will be one of the hardest instances in the game's history. Hopefully the coming updates won't be limited to the game's most hardcore playerbase. With the right balance of new content, there could be plenty of reasons to keep coming back.

That's an exciting prospect, because it's easy to see how *Heart of Thorns* restructures *Guild Wars 2* towards future expansions. From here, ArenaNet has a way to develop sideways into broader options while keeping the base progression intact. A new round of specialisations here, a new set of masteries there – this modular approach is tailor-made for similarly sized additions. Put another way, I've already logged over 700 hours with my Thief. Having now tried *Heart of Thorns*, I can see myself playing hundreds more. ■

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

85

A great expansion, and a promising sign of things to come. Issues aside, this is a clever addition to one of the best MMOs.

Batman: Arkham Knight
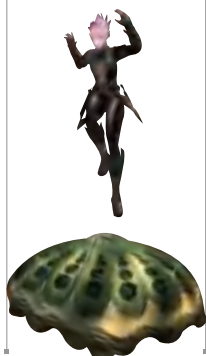
BROKEN BAT

BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT is a fine end to the series, but this isn't the PC port Gotham deserves. *By Andy Kelly*

Gotham is under attack. *Again.* But while Batman is, as always, on the case, the cracks are beginning to show. There's a weariness to the world's greatest detective this time around, as years on the job – and the pressure to find a worthy successor – begin to take their toll. *Arkham Knight* is as much about a tired, ageing Bruce Wayne's struggle with himself as it is about stopping a super-villain holding his city hostage.

And it's a weariness I felt myself. The production values are richer than ever, the city is bigger than before, and there's more stuff to do in it, but after three *Arkham* games it feels like another trip around the block. Luckily, Rocksteady's *Batman* games are fundamentally good, so there's enough great stuff in here – among, admittedly, a lot of not-so-great stuff – that I made it to the end and didn't feel like I'd wasted my time.

The villain this time is Scarecrow, who's threatening to flood Gotham with his fear toxin. A by-the-numbers evil plot as far as they go, but it's enough motivation for Bruce to pull on the cowl and go swooping into the night. Other famous heels make an appearance, including Two-Face, Penguin, and The Riddler, but it's the Arkham Knight, a mysterious new enemy, who takes centre stage. Hell, they even named the game after him.

This enigmatic character commands a private army, wears a curiously Batman-shaped helmet that obscures his face, and seems to know an awful lot about the Dark Knight. Discovering his identity is the game's central mystery, even though you'll figure it out long before Batman does. So between this mysterious new rival and Scarecrow – not to mention dozens of other crimes that need his attention around the city – it's another busy night for the Caped Crusader. It's a good thing he has the Batmobile to help him.

> **It certainly looks cool, but the Batmobile is a failure on every level**

Well, not really. It certainly looks cool, but the Batmobile is a failure on every level. For one thing, Gotham just isn't big enough to warrant its existence. Why navigate a giant unwieldy car through twisting streets and alleyways when you can glide to your destination in a fraction of the time? It's not even that fun to drive, its handling weightless and slippy. I only ever used it when the game told me to, which is pretty damning.

And the game forces you to use it far too often. A mystifyingly large percentage of *Arkham Knight* is dedicated to ponderous, boring vehicle combat, in which you use the Batmobile's battle mode to blow up waves of conveniently unmanned tanks and flying drones. Their attacks are so obviously telegraphed, with big white lines telling you where they're aiming – flashing red to indicate that they're about to fire – that these sections present no meaningful challenge whatsoever.

DRONING ON

I didn't mind them at first, because they were a nice change of pace. A dumb, reasonably entertaining shooting gallery to mix things up. But there are so many of them that fatigue soon sets in. And when you start having to use *stealth* to take out certain drones – sneaking behind them and firing at an exposed weak points – you wonder what was going through the developers' heads when they designed this stuff. I've never felt less like Batman, and I groaned whenever the Arkham Knight sent in yet another wave of dumb drones for me to halfheartedly destroy.

Stupid car aside, this is a decent *Arkham* game. The predator sections, which have always been the highlight of the series for me, are more fun than ever. Hanging in the rafters, picking off enemies as they quake in fear, is as brilliantly satisfying as it's always been – and now there are even more ways to mess with them. Hacking drones to turn on their allies, and replicating the Arkham

DRIVING FORCE *Under the Batmobile's hood*

1 EJECTOR SEAT
Double tap the eject button to throw Batman into a long, high glide.

2 VULCAN GUN
Blows up unmanned drones, safely knocks out humans. How versatile.

3 AFTERBURNER
Gives the Batmobile a short, powerful burst of speed. Can be upgraded.
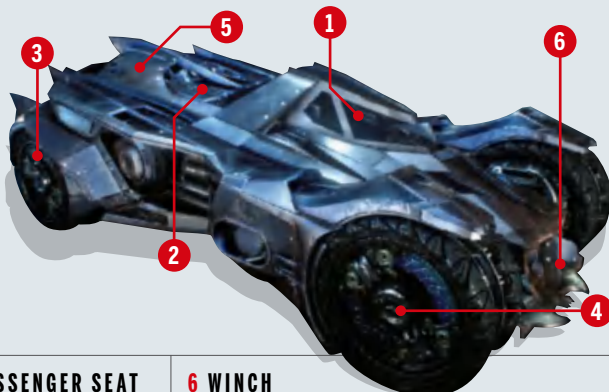
4 EMP
Zaps nearby drones, temporarily disabling their movement and weapons.

5 PASSENGER SEAT
For transporting captured villains and rescued hostages back to GCPD.

6 WINCH
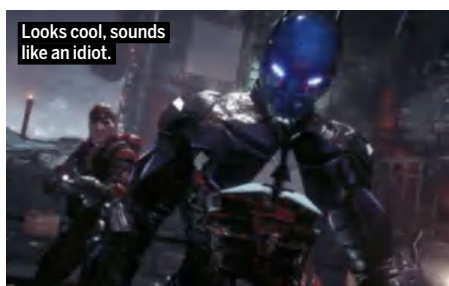Used for climbing up buildings (yes, really) and destroying things.
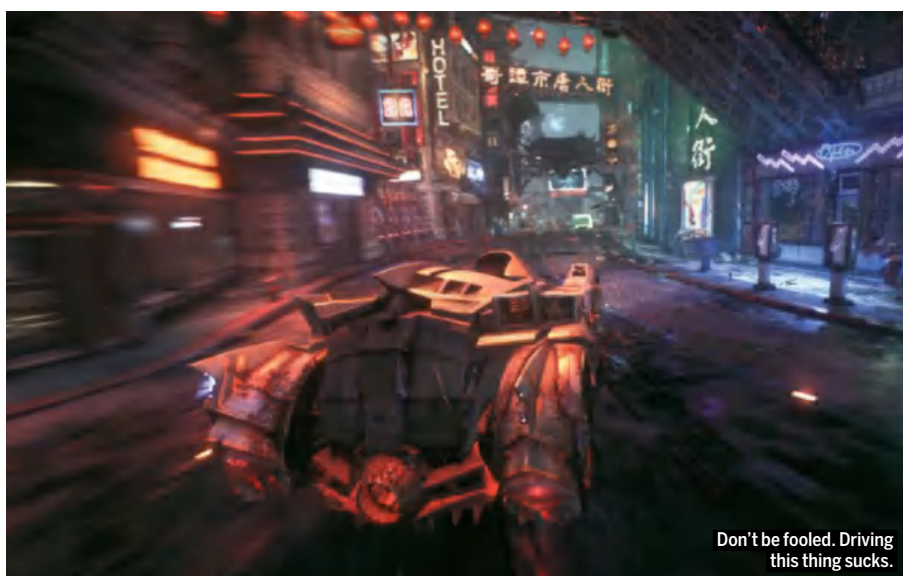
Gotham's a mess, and you're the janitor.

Looks cool, sounds like an idiot.

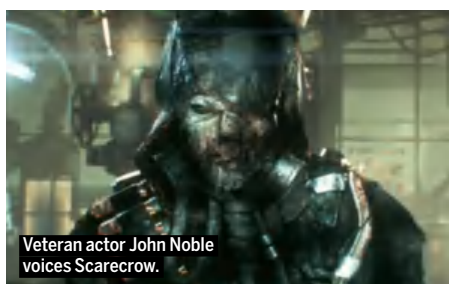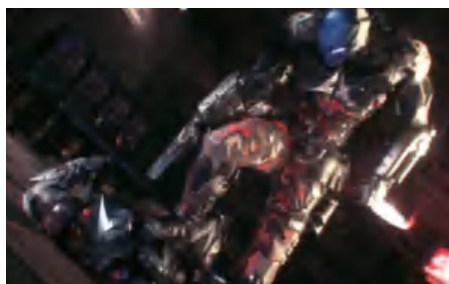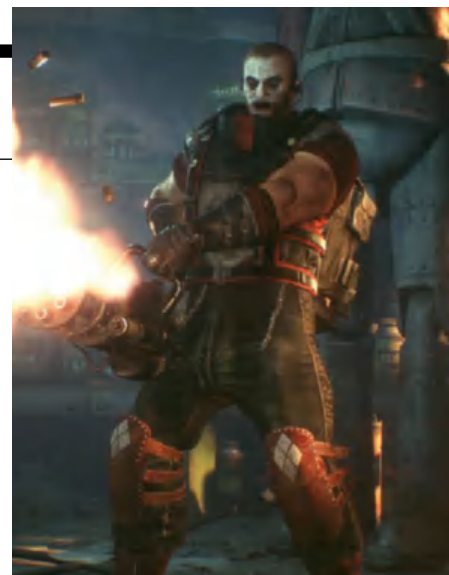Teaming up with Robin is great, but over too quickly.

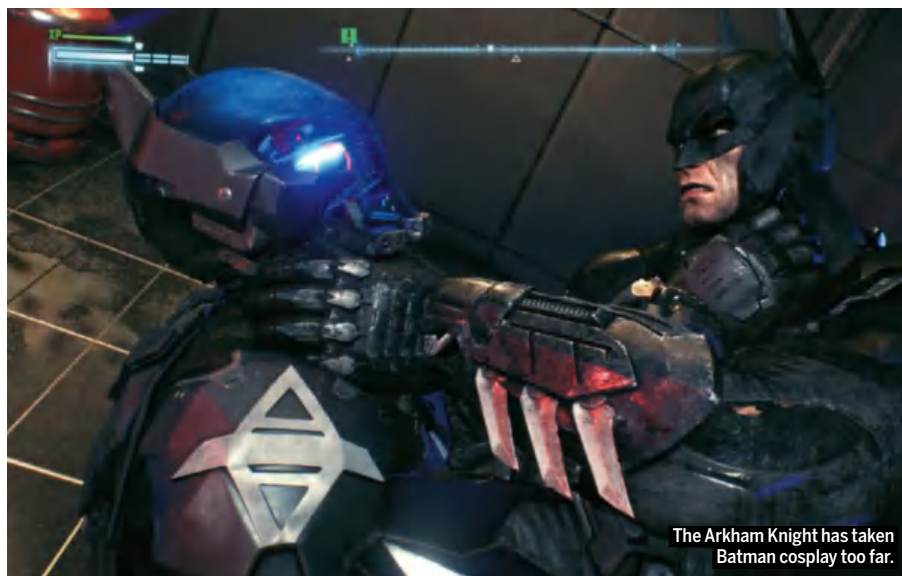Don't be fooled. Driving this thing sucks.
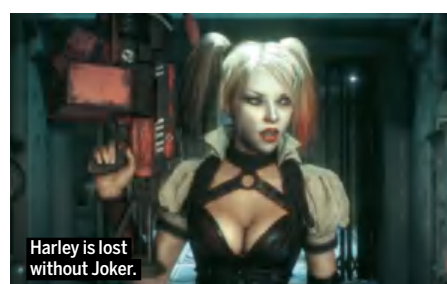
Harley is lost without Joker.

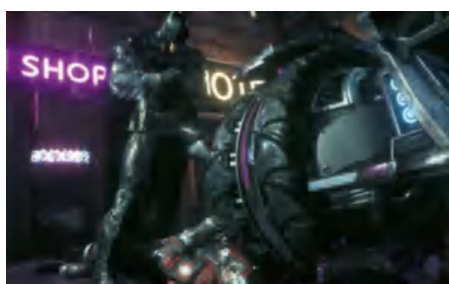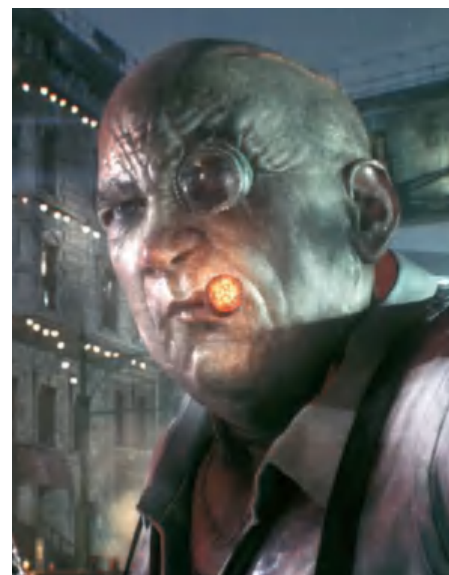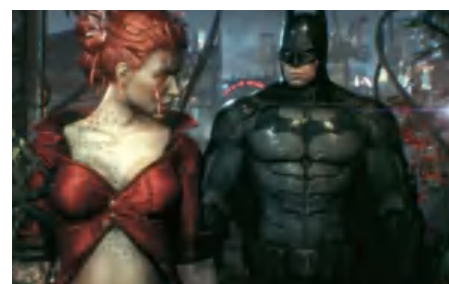The bat-signal is your objective marker.

Veteran actor John Noble voices Scarecrow.

The Arkham Knight has taken Batman cosplay too far.

You can glide higher and faster than ever.

This is no time to play solitaire, Bats.

» Knight's voice to order his men around and separate them from the group for a quiet KO, are just a few of the new ways to creatively clear a room of bad guys. Batman's utility belt is fat with gadgets – some old, some new – to experiment with.

Playing with these and the environment, discovering interesting ways to clear a room, is the best part of the game. It's here that Rocksteady's systemic design really shines, and Batman's graceful, precise movement makes swinging and skulking around the detailed environments a joy. And when stealth isn't an option, the fist-fights are great fun too, thanks to the series' trademark counter-based, rhythmic combat. The moment-to-moment play is as tight as ever, which only highlights just how poor the Batmobile stuff is.

FILLER INSTINCT

This being an open-world game, there's a lot to do outside of the main plot. This stuff – as you might expect – varies in quality. There are some superb self-contained stories, such as hunting down a sadistic serial killer and stopping Two-Face from cleaning out Gotham's banks. But there's also a lot of pretty boring filler, including destroying watchtowers and clearing each of the city's three islands of the Arkham Knight's forces. It's in the story where best moments and the most memorable set-pieces are found.

It's a shame the Arkham Knight is such a comically bad villain. He's horribly miscast, sounding less like an intimidating, mysterious nemesis, and more like a dumb surfer. He spends the whole game barking into your radio about how Gotham is his city now, and how you'll never stop him, as you effortlessly destroy every single useless, dopey drone he throws at you. And when you finally get the chance to fight him, about ten hours into the story, it's a stealth tank battle. I still don't understand why they named the entire game after this weak pantomime villain.

In terms of pacing and the quality of the writing, this is probably the least successful entry in the series so far. But I did like seeing weakness in Batman, and rare cracks in his armour. The villains' plans are as ludicrously far-fetched as ever, but there are some surprisingly human, poignant moments in here – particularly between Batman and Barbara Gordon – that just about make up for the otherwise hoary, predictable comic book story. Sadly, though, despite Scarecrow being the main villain, the toxin-induced hallucination sequences have none of *Arkham Asylum*'s fourth wall-shattering brilliance.

But here's the rub. As a game, *Arkham Knight* is good. You'll probably enjoy it, especially if you love Batman. But as a product, it's a mess. Even after several patches and the embarrassment of being pulled from Steam shortly after it went on sale, it's still running horribly for a lot of people. A significant number of players are suffering low framerates and hitching – even with powerful machines well above the recommended specs – and that simply can't be ignored.

With 16GB of RAM and a GTX 970, I was able to play in 1080p at a reliable 60 frames per second with most settings maxed. Except for some stuttering when the screen got really busy, I was able to enjoy it. But because the experience varies so wildly between systems, it's not a game I can comfortably recommend to everyone. And the inconsistent reports about its performance mean I can't even give you a vague idea of what kind of setup will be able to run it without any problems.

Rocksteady and WB are promising further patches that will, among other things, add SLI/CrossFire support. But there's really no excuse for a game of this scale being released in this state in the first place.

RAIN MAN

When it's working, this is one of the best-looking games on PC. There's a dizzying, almost perverse amount of detail squeezed into every screen, from rain trickling down Batman's cowl to the intricate moving parts of the Batmobile as it switches between pursuit and battle mode.

Rocksteady's world-building has always been top notch, and the environment design in *Arkham Knight* – particularly the cluttered, detailed interiors – is among its best work. I must have spent an hour just

> **When it's working, it's one of the best-looking games on PC**

wandering around the GCPD building, talking to starstruck cops, hunting for obscure comic book references, and watching all the criminals I'd captured so far pacing and ranting in their cells.

Gotham itself is a beautiful, intricate thing, with three distinct islands to explore. It doesn't *really* feel like a city – more like a giant adventure playground designed specifically for Batman – but grappling and gliding around its neon-lit skyscrapers in the pounding rain is exhilarating.

Still, I'm glad this is Rocksteady's last Batman game, because as much as I love the series, it's on the brink of losing its magic. The Rocksteady team have done everything they possibly could with Batman – except perhaps, justice to the Batmobile – and this is the right time for Bruce to hang up the cowl. Ultimately, despite the feeble villain and the frustrating amount of forced Batmobile combat, the feeling of being Batman in *Arkham Knight* is still as wonderfully empowering as it's been since *Asylum*. But none of that matters if you can't run the damn thing. ■

PC GAMER | **VERDICT**

A fun superhero power fantasy, let down by awful Batmobile combat, an inept villain, and a shoddy port job.

70

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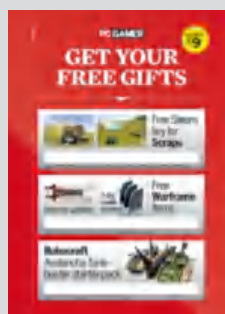
1 # Free Steam key for **SCRAPS**

Destroy all vehicles

Scraps: Modular Vehicle Combat is a Steam Early Access game where you build vehicles out of component parts and make them fight against either human or AI opponents. Destroying enemies enables you to take their components to further develop your war machine of choice.

Scraps normally sells for £9.99 on Steam, but we're giving the game away for free with this issue. Over time, the creator is planning to add more maps, more parts to build your vehicles out of, improved vehicle physics and other extras. Read all about it at www.scrapsgame.com.

Wonder if this thing would pass its MOT.

HOW DO I REDEEM MY CODE?
This is a Steam key, so all you need to do is download the Steam client at www.steampowered.com, boot it, click on the Activate Code option under the game tab and enter the key. Boom – it should be in your Steam library.

2 Free WARFRAME ITEMS!

Get a free Redeemer gunblade and booster

Digital Extremes' *Warframe* is a regular fixture in Steam's top ten most-played list. This month we're giving away free items for this sci-fi multiplayer game. These codes get you a hybrid gunblade, called the Redeemer, as well as a seven-day credit booster.

Warframe recently added Steam Workshop support, so you can now create content for the game and receive 30% of the sales received from your item if your submission is approved.

Get your credit boost on for a whole week.

HOW DO I REDEEM MY CODE?

After you've created an account at *www.warframe.com*, login and enter your code at *www.warframe.com/promocode*. Codes are limited to one per player.

Dino tanks unite!

3 ROBOCRAFT
Avalanche Tank-buster starter pack

Get a vehicle and booster for this free-to-play game
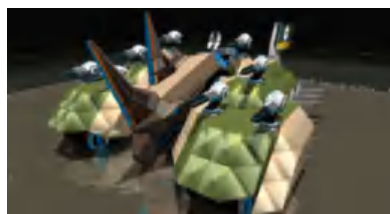
In this popular competitive team-based vehicle combat game, players add futuristic weapons to their battle machines. With this free code, you can unlock an Avalanche Tank-buster Robot, as well as seven days of premium play (granting you a 100% bonus to earnings from battles, as well as 5% for all other players). You also get an extra garage slot to house your new tank-slaying robot.

Robocraft is a game about building, driving and fighting, where you to create your robot from over 350 parts. There's also a player vs AI survival mode you can take part in, plus you have the opportunity to sell or lease your creations, or buy and hire new ones.

HOW DO I REDEEM MY CODE?

Download from *www.robocraftgame.com*, install the game and boot it. Then, hit Esc and click on the 'Enter code' button. Codes expire 31/12/15.

Armikrog

PLAY D'OH

ARMIKROG's disdain for logic and obvious incompleteness is a waste of good claymation. *By Angus Morrison*

Armikrog feels like a lot of the kid's videogames foisted on me by non-gaming relatives in the '90s. I probably would have enjoyed it more at that age, too. Back then I was so excited to be playing games at all that I could innocently interpret a string of trivial but illogical obstacles as mysterious rather than a sign of shoddy production. Delayed twice, *Armikrog* is still chock full of padding, which is remarkable considering it's just four hours long.

The opening cutscene got my hopes up. Pencil Test Studios' claymation is rich and fluid, given earthy authenticity by the fingerprints in the clay that studios like Aardman edit out. Spaceman Tommynaut and his psychic dog Beak Beak crawl from their crashed spaceship only to be accosted by the local wildlife in a slapstick sequence worthy of any Saturday morning cartoon. Then they run inside a nearby tower and slam the door on a promising start.

Facial animation is the first thing I noticed was missing. When Beak Beak and Tommy chat, the sound spouts from a nonspecific location. As there's precious little conversation in any case, you stop noticing this soon enough. Usually adventure games lean on dialogue to energise static scenes, but Tommy and Beak Beak proceed in silence, as if in a lovers' tiff and waiting for the other to apologise.

It's not just about flavour – muteness is a mechanical problem. Neither character will indicate when a problem requires their intervention. A button at waist height might need either Tommy or Beak Beak to press it, or it could need powering-on elsewhere, but you can't know unless you try with both. Every time. This is part of a larger problem that *Armikrog* has with clarity and finesse. It uses the default Windows cursor, incongruous in a world of clay, and offers not the slightest hint as to which objects are interactive and which are not, or which character must do the dirty work. Worse, some buttons become interactive only

when they're good and ready for you, masquerading as static scenery until then. Elsewhere, the haste with which *Armikrog* must have been thrown together is betrayed by the telltale halo of a green screen.

Maybe I'm grateful for the silence. "Greetings, friend! I am Abrah-ant Lincoln" chatters an ant in a top hat before clicking out a puzzle. That's all he says. There's also Thomas Jeffers-ant, complete with Declaration of Independ-ants (that's one of mine) and what might have been a Roosevelt, but he doesn't talk long enough to deliver an ant-based pun – the very height of humour on this baffling plane of existence. As to why there is a stream of US presid-ants (hire me), *Armikrog* doesn't much care. It's the random comedic grasping of a child learning to structure a joke.

> **It's the random grasping of a child learning to structure a joke**

The game operates on internal logic divorced from any school of human thought. It's not about problem solving but completing the same set of isolated, artificial tasks three times over before the final showdown. It makes the first round of puzzles quite mystifying: push the orange monster to the right to open a secret door. Who cares why. Use the psychic dog to talk to the tentacle creature, who will deliver a cutscene entirely in a made-up language before spitting out a machine part. For reasons. Use a lever to enter a cable car, but make sure it's the right lever and not the one that just looks like the right lever because the model is bugged. Solve a sliding block puzzle for the third time, because that's what counts as a lock around here. *Armikrog* is beaten through learned behaviour, not deductive reasoning.

STUCK INSIDE A MOBILE

The chasm between *Armikrog* logic and real logic is embodied by the baby puzzle. Early on you find an abandoned infant, and to stop it crying you have to complete a memory test, hooking toys to a mobile as an off-key jingle nibbles at your sanity. If the jingle completes a full rendition without anything falling, you receive a vital, story-progressing item. Otherwise, you have to rearrange the toys and sit through a tortuous encore. This vestigial excuse for a puzzle is wheeled out thrice to kill time.

Armikrog treats the chain of causality with contempt, beholden to nothing but its own sporadic attempts to challenge you. Your first encounter with any given puzzle provides the solution to the lot, if only you weren't confronted with the arduous task of implementing it. ∎

HALF-BAKED STRONGHOLD

Armikrog's **questionable security measures**
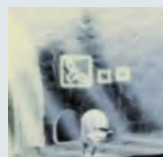
PICTOGRAPHIC LOCK
Scrawling your security code on the walls seems like something it would be tough to get past the insurers.
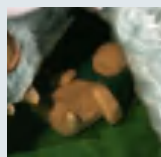
BABY-GLO
Hiding a limitless radioactive power source in the digestive tract of a baby certainly isn't where your average thief would look.
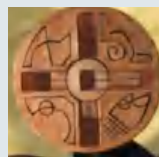
SLIDING BLOCK LOCKS
Why use a key when you can spend ten minutes arranging a lock to look like the inhabitant of the room?

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

Armikrog's memory puzzles and tenuous humour are a low point in the adventure game renaissance.

46

Stare into the mobile and know despair.
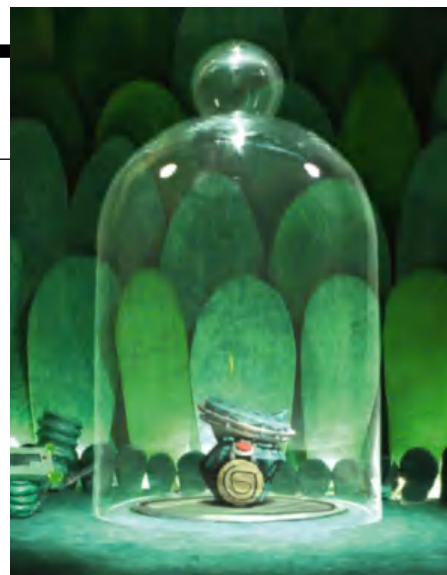
Even unique set pieces test memory instead of reasoning.
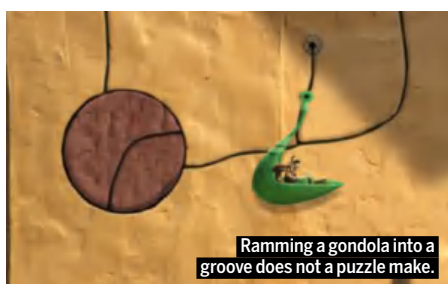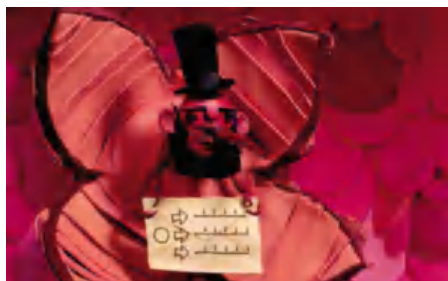
Ramming a gondola into a groove does not a puzzle make.

The quality of the cutscenes becomes steadily further out of place.

SELL BLOCK

Running a for-profit jail proves a grimly satisfying challenge in **PRISON ARCHITECT**. *By Christopher Livingston*

I was several hours into my first game of *Prison Architect* when I found myself utterly humiliated. I'd been playing Introversion Software's prison construction and management simulator the same way I play any other sim, by slowly expanding my network of buildings while keeping an eye on my finances, staff, and current goals. But most of all, I'd been doing everything I could to meet the needs of my ever-growing population of inmates.

If they complained they were hungry, I'd serve higher quality meals. If they complained about hygiene or that they missed their families, I'd construct new facilities to accommodate them. As a result, I'd experienced no riots, no fist-fights, no unpleasantness of any kind. Everything seemed to be going great.

Then I received a notification that an escape tunnel had been found. Five prisoners in adjoining cells had smuggled in tools and burrowed to freedom right under my nose (and right under the exterior wall). That's when the embarrassment hit, because something important and incredibly obvious simply hadn't dawned on me until that very moment: meeting an

inmate's needs isn't the same thing as making them happy. *Prison Architect* isn't like other management sims where you deal with a restless and fickle population. There simply is no happy state for your residents. Maybe they don't want to start fires or lay into a guard with a power drill, but that doesn't mean they want to be where they are. No one wants to be in your prison! Lesson learned, too late.

Building your facility is accomplished in the same fashion as many other sims: drag an outline of a foundation, add doors, and pull electrical cables and water pipes into place. Designate the type of room it is and plop in the required equipment. The complexity sets in

> ## This isn't like other sims. There is no happy state for your residents

when you want to use these rooms. Kitchens and canteens can be designated to serve specific cellblocks, security cameras need to be connected to consoles in a command centre and guards need to be hired and assigned to monitor them. Building a workshop takes only a moment, but then you'll need to hire an instructor to train inmates to work there and schedule classes and labour shifts. It can be overwhelming at times, as your to-do list grows and grows – and as prisoners start walking out with tools under their jumpsuits – but it's also satisfying when all the pieces fall into place.

THE MEAN MILE

The tutorial campaign doesn't teach you, step-by-step, how to build a prison. Instead it puts you in charge of a series of them, each needing various problems solved, giving you a variety of experiences before you start your own. The downside is that it simply doesn't give you a clue about a large number of the game's elements and features. Once I'd begun playing in sandbox mode, I found I had to pause the game to search Google, forums, or read the wiki, a little too frequently.

That doesn't prevent *Prison Architect* from being an incredibly engrossing balancing act, a simulation with the ability to surprise, challenge, and sometimes horrify you. Escape Mode lets you play as an inmate in your own jail, or one you've downloaded, and challenges you to form a gang and bust out. Speaking of which, I haven't lost a prisoner since those first five tunnelled out, except from the occasional cafeteria shanking or overdose from smuggled drugs. That's about as happy as things get in my grim little city. ■

THE GREAT ESCAPE

How to bust out of your own prison
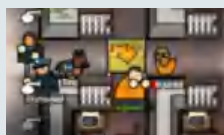
1 Gain reputation points by picking fights or smashing up furniture.

2 Use those points to form your own badass prison gang to cause trouble.

3 Search for contraband and weapons in tool shops and other rooms.

4 Stash tools in your cell, then tunnel out at night like Tim Robbins.
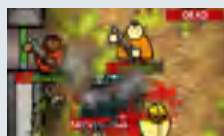
5 You can also try to invade the armoury and shoot your way out.
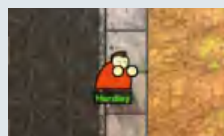
6 Or you could simply wait for a good opportunity and run for it.

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

Prison Architect doesn't make life easy for you, but this is a complex, challenging, and grimly satisfying simulator.

87

Riots can become exceedingly ugly.

Campaign mode lets you get to know a few prisoners.

Henry Morgan

Lice in the beds sir. Eating me alive. Shirt keeps out the rats. Biggest ones I ever saw.
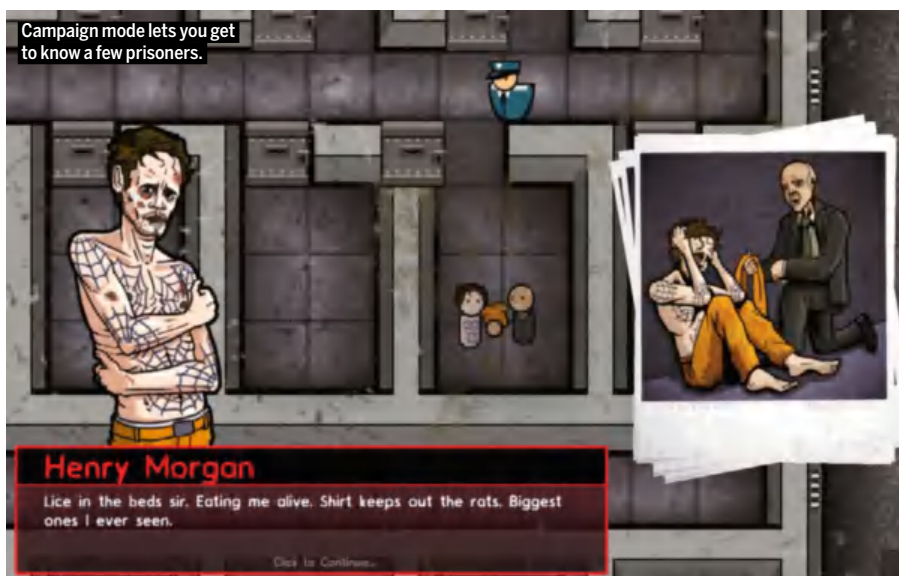
Planning mode lets you design before building.

Rubble

There's more to do in prison than just lift weights.

Programs
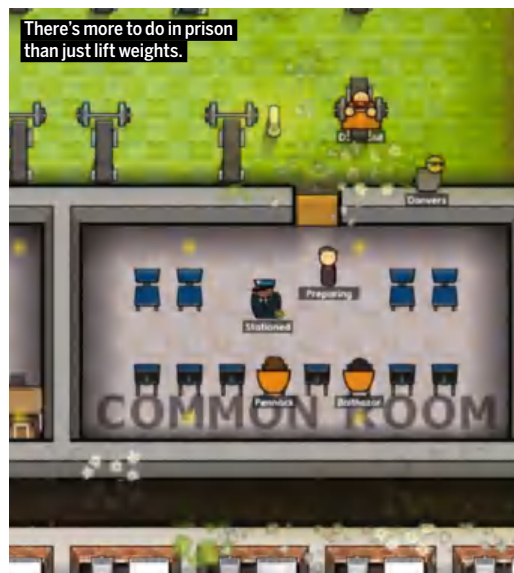
Life is Strange

OUT OF FOCUS

LIFE IS STRANGE is messy, uneven and still kind of brilliant. *By Phil Savage*

I like *Life is Strange*, but it's not that simple. It's an uneven production that lacks consistency across plot, tone and design. It's an episodic adventure game in the Telltale style. The emphasis is on choice and consequence, not puzzles and inventory management. Dontnod's production isn't as polished or well-paced as *The Walking Dead*, and yet I think I prefer it. There's a lot that *Life is Strange* does wrong, but it can be powerfully affecting at its best.

You play Max Caulfield, a photography student who returns to her hometown of Arcadia Bay to attend the prestigious Blackwell Academy. Max is shy, loves selfies and also has the power to rewind time. She learns this latter fact while saving the life of Chloe, a punkish, blue-haired Blackwell dropout. Max and Chloe used to be best friends, but fell out of touch. After the incident, the two reconnect, and Chloe enlists Max's help in searching for her other friend, Rachel, who recently went missing.

Arcadia Bay has troubles of its own. It's beset by a series of weird 'eco-disasters': snow in summer, an unscheduled eclipse, etc. It's heavily implied that these disasters are supernatural and perhaps apocalyptic. Blackwell students are even planning an 'End of the World' party – a metaphor with all the subtlety of a bull smashing up the coming-of-age shelf of a DVD store, a copy of The Rules of Attraction impaled on one horn.

Throughout the game, you encounter multiple divergent options. So far, so Telltale, but, thanks to Max's time powers, every decision can be rewritten. You can, for instance, revel in the schadenfreude of a rival's misfortune, then skip back and do the right thing. I found it useful when I was first feeling my way through Max's life and relationships. Over time, I became firmer in my convictions – rarely feeling the need to double back and see the alternative choice play out.

There are a few puzzles, and the best of them use Max's rewind in interesting ways. They're welcome pace breakers from the drama, but do occasionally tip towards padding and busywork. At one point, in episode two, Max is forced to hunt down empty bottles in a junkyard. It's a sequence so tedious that it earns a self-deprecating reference in a later chapter.

The story is part character drama, part detective mystery, part sci-fi adventure. It's in trying to balance

> **It's a brilliant attempt at progressing and improving Telltale's style**

these three strands that the game most frequently stumbles. *Life* will undercut its drama in service of mystery, even as the mystery attempts to set up a greater drama.

Life is Strange is at its best when focusing on the characters. Initially archetypes, each gains depth and motivation as the story moves forward. At times, the game is pointed in its observation. Warren, ostensibly a close friend, is a clingy Nice Guy™-lite, whose constant, desperate bids for affection made me want to cringe my skin off. While the dialogue doesn't always do the characters service (do teens still say "hella"?), the voice acting is consistently strong. Max and Chloe are particularly deserving of praise. Their shifting, strengthening relationship underpins the game's best moments.

LA DOLCE VITA

The game has its own quiet beauty. For all its missteps, the atmosphere it creates is pitch perfect. It looks gorgeous – rendered in a painterly, hyperreal style that seems to effortlessly create memorable moments. Images as simple as Max sitting contemplatively in someone's kitchen can feel poignant and vulnerable. The soundtrack is excellent, the acoustic score accompanied by tracks from Mogwai, Amanda Palmer, Foals and co.

Life is Strange feels like it should be quirky, or arch, or have a cameo by Greta Gerwig. Instead, it's unfocused but earnest. It's a brilliant attempt at progressing and improving Telltale's style, even as it's not, in and of itself, brilliant. I could nitpick many problems with the plot and pacing, but this nonetheless remains one of my favourite games of the year. ■

CLASS OF '15 *Meet the students of Blackwell Academy*

WARREN
Probably spends his evenings on Reddit, complaining about being friendzoned.

NATHAN
Rich and unstable. Shoots Chloe at the start of the game, which isn't very nice.

JUSTIN
The stoner kid. Later in the game, you meet him in a toilet, just staring at a sink.

BROOKE
The science geek. Inexplicably has a thing for Warren. Frankly, she can have him.

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

Beautiful, touching and messy, much like the real thing. *Life is Strange* is good – not great – but I'd recommend it to anyone.

77
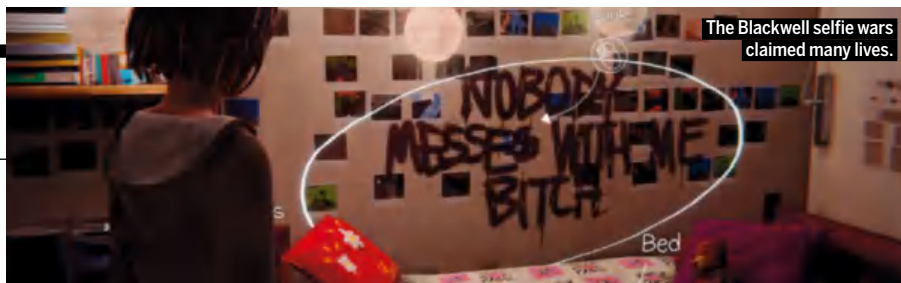
The Blackwell selfie wars claimed many lives.
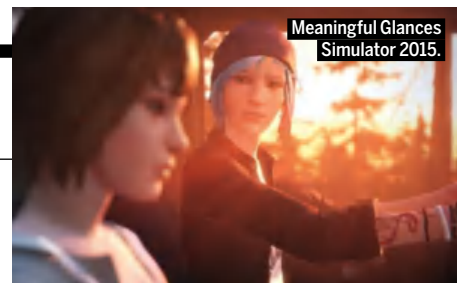
Meaningful Glances Simulator 2015.

The moment that broke Tumblr.

Contemplative sitting is a big part of *Life is Strange*.

Not pictured: emotions.
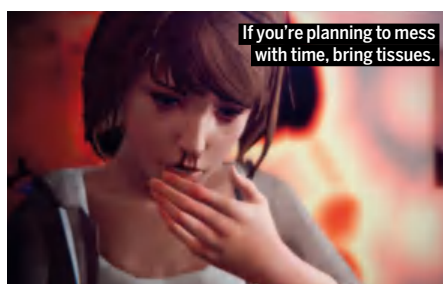
If you're planning to mess with time, bring tissues.

Area man is sad about fishing.

I don't recall Agent J being as handy with a knife as here.
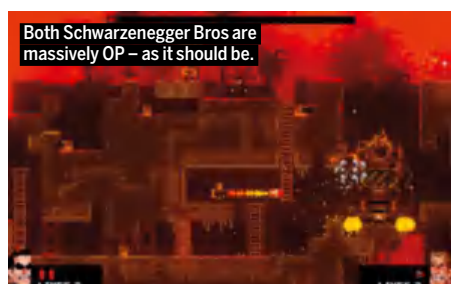
Both Schwarzenegger Bros are massively OP – as it should be.

Why is Robocop in Vietnam? Shhhh.
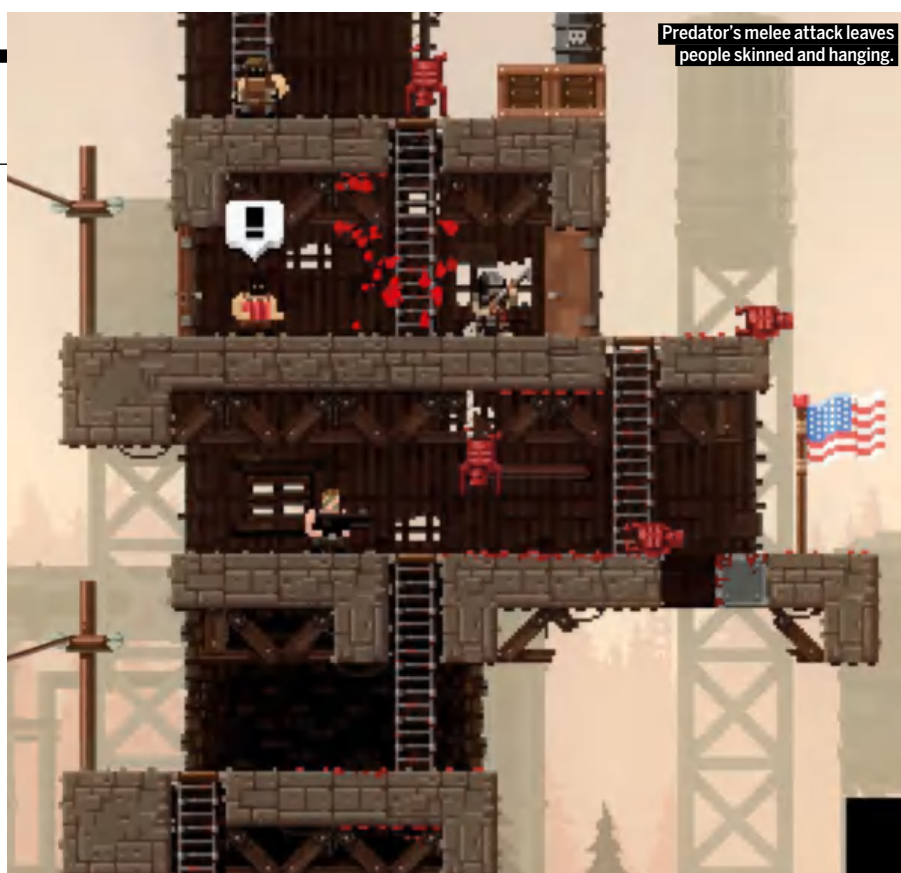
Predator's melee attack leaves people skinned and hanging.

EXPLOSION NOISE

One of film's oldest tropes makes **BROFORCE** feel somehow new. *By Joe Skrebels*

Get mission -> kill bad guys -> rescue good guys -> kill big bad guy -> escape on helicopter into sunset. The archetypal action movie plot is so mechanical that developer Free Lives has turned it into an actual game mechanic. It's how every single level of *Broforce*'s technically endless campaign plays out. Sometimes you're escaping on one of those massive, diagonally-moving lifts you only ever see in evil labs, but the effect is the same.

This is *Broforce*'s design philosophy: pilfer from action movies, use their familiarity to build an immediately readable game. It may take the form of the run 'n' gun genre – all pixels, enemy screams and one-shot-one-death twitchery – but you'll draw more of your understanding from the films those games were invoking in the first place.

That's most obvious in the characters, every one of which is pacey, can climb any surface infinitely, and comes with primary, secondary and melee weapons. They can play totally differently – the brilliance is that if you're au fait with the action film canon, you'll have a handle on how they work even before you've used them.

There's no choice as to who you play: you're randomly assigned a Bro at the start of a stage. Rescuing a caged PoW wins you an extra life but randomises you again. It's a lovely system, making you weigh the benefits of a good character against staying alive longer but getting a crap one. Everyone wants to be Leon, who can have tiny Natalie Portman snipe swathes of enemies, but no one bar no one wants to be McGyver, who weedily throws big turkeys with TNT stuffing. The more PoWs you rescue, the more Bros you're able to turn into.

It's a shame the levels don't receive quite the same amount of attention. Vietnam-style greenery is reused over and over, with brief pit stops in far more interesting urban environments and tunnel systems. Enemies are reused constantly too – although they at least interact interestingly as time goes on, definitely-not-facehuggers killing AI mooks to become definitely-not-xenomorphs. Fatigue sets in anyway.

Presumably, Free Lives didn't concentrate on level design because mostly, half of it's gone before you've stepped on it. Even Indy's whip can destroy terrain – you're more often carving your way under footpaths than using them. This leads to the game's biggest sticking point: whether to play with friends or not.

It's certainly a spectacle – with the right four characters, the entire screen can disappear in seconds – but actually playing becomes a sterner test. It's incredibly easy to lose track of your character, so you don't notice you're collapsing a bridge on your friends' heads, ruining the game for everyone. Yet playing alone can make certain boss fights near impossible.

But perfection is perhaps not the point. Like the movies it adores, *Broforce* is short of perfect in a purely critical sense, but you're unlikely to find something as absolutely joyful as this for quite some time. ■

With the right characters, the entire screen can disappear in seconds

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

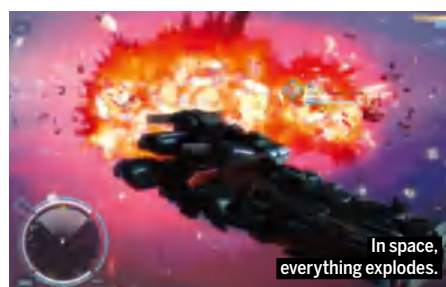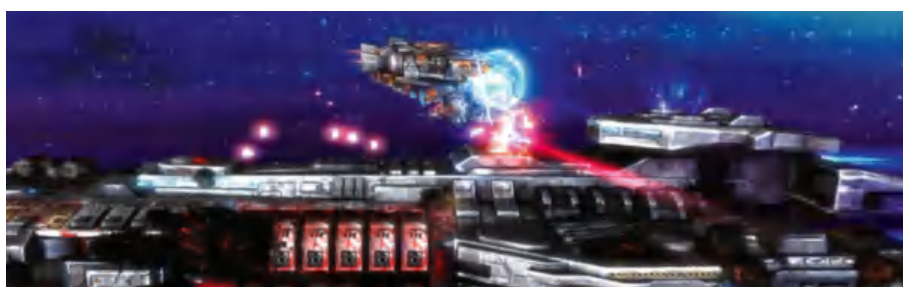Brash, solid, run 'n' gun goofiness that's a tad underwrought – although you may have too much fun to notice.

78

Asteroid belts are exciting places for a chaotic battle.

Tsk. Space stations are surrounded by debris.

In space, everything explodes.

FLEET & REPEAT

REBEL GALAXY shows that one good space battle goes a long way. *By Christopher Livingston*

My first impressions weren't great. In my starter ship, a slow and clunky behemoth with boosters unable to fire for more than a few seconds and default cannons that overheated almost as quickly, I wound up in a fight with an AI pirate ship just as lousy as mine. We circled each other for long minutes, blasting with our feeble weapons, neither of us able to finish the other off, until I quit the game out of boredom.

If I hadn't been reviewing it I may never have gone back, but I am, and I did, and I'm glad. This space action combat RPG gets off to a slow start, and features a little too much repetition and grinding, but there are some exciting and chaotic space battles and an enjoyable if not highly original selection of activities. It also looks great: wonderfully designed ships, crackling weapon effects, beautiful lighting and explosions.

You're the captain of a massive tub, a real clunker, but through the standard videogame space activities of mining, trading, and bounty hunting – or the outlaw versions of killing miners and traders for their goods – your spacebucks pave the way to better weapons, engines and shields. Buy a better ship and you can take more lucrative jobs and

eventually buy an even *better* ship. Story missions add a little structure and purpose, but their difficulty increases dramatically, so you still need to spend hours grinding before you can move onto the next.

> ## You're the captain of a massive tub, a real clunker

Whatever your profession, you'll spend most of your time in combat. Your ship is constrained to a 2D plane: you only turn left and right, so there's no rolling or banking or loop-the-loops. This keeps movement in combat simple, but it feels less like you're piloting a spacecraft and more like you're steering a cruise liner.

At times, the battles can be tremendous fun, especially if you stumble into a massive engagement between rival factions. You can manoeuvre yourself alongside a capital ship and unleash broadsides, aimed and charged by holding the

mouse button for greater focus and damage. Incoming missiles can be blocked if you have deflectors, activated by tapping the spacebar, which is a fun reflex-based defence even though it takes your own weapons offline for a moment. Turrets will autofire but can also be manually aimed by switching weapons with the number keys.

More routine skirmishes aren't always so great. On your long trips to and fro across the solar system, you'll commonly run into randomly generated pirates who attack you after delivering canned, repetitive threats. One trip I took to reach a mission area was interrupted six times by these random pipsqueaks. When I finally reached my mission I was promptly destroyed in combat.

Rebel Galaxy is a grind, but an enjoyable one. It doesn't provide much tactical depth or bring anything original to the genre, but it looks great, and its fun (mostly) arcadey combat comes at a reasonable price. ∎

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A space combat action-RPG.

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Double Damage Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel i7 x980 3.33GHz, 9GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 960

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.rebel-galaxy.com

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

Rebel Galaxy's combat can be a lot of fun, and looks great, but there's little depth and a lot of repetition here.

70

Floating crates?
Rookie mistake.

The resemblance to my own
level experiments is uncanny.

Glitches are, just for once,
actually a feature.

CRITICAL PATH

THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE is a short, straight walk down Insecurity Lane. *By Tyler Wilde*

This followup to *The Stanley Parable* is most outwardly about the relationship between game creator and game player. It's a very personal expression, and I like that writer Davey Wreden is sincerely exploring his own creative struggles. I especially like that he's made something even more peculiar than *The Stanley Parable,* even if it isn't nearly as successful. The only important thing the two games share is an unconventional narrator.

Wreden, as himself, narrates a tour of experimental Source engine games ostensibly made by his friend, Coda. It's like a documentary, but it feels illicit – we're experiencing someone's personal projects, a collection that was never meant to be shared. The first project is a slightly odd *Counter-Strike* level, then we visit a shooter with no enemies, and onward to iterations of a strange prison and experiments with dialogue. The early games are convincingly the plain work of a beginner, but Wreden finds exciting creativity and mystery in each as he tries to decode Coda's thoughts. It's enchantingly genuine. I thought of my own folders of false starts and documents called 'story.txt' and 'test.png.'

The games are about walking and listening to Wreden talk and little more than that, which is interesting enough for about half of the roughly 90-minute experience. Just buying into the concept that these are someone else's games, and we're going to prowl through all of them for clues about what's going on in that person's head, is exciting. But as the games become more complex and more explicit about their meaning, Coda loses his charm. The fiction that he, and not Wreden, created these vignettes starts to crack as I notice Wreden's own voice in them.

I was looking forward to seeing what strange, subversive games Wreden could come up with, but the cleverness is lost to serve the story. There's just not much to interpret here. The metaphors are blunt – a social anxiety theatre, a literal

> **It's interesting enough for about half the 90-minute experience**

creative machine – and Wreden's narration becomes overbearing and utterly on the nose. The games start to feel like parodies of artsy games, but not funny ones. The curious, mostly wordless poems of the beginning become more like frustrated diary entries.

But *The Beginner's Guide* doesn't indulge itself for long. It ended before I could start feeling too nostalgic for its beginning, and before its melodrama became unendurable. And there's plenty to talk about, because even though it's not at all subtle about its themes, there's such a great jumble of them that they can be puzzled together into plenty of different interpretations. It can be about depression and isolation, how art and fear are inextricable, the debate over authorial intention, how we compromise our work for external validation, or, at the very surface, the pressure Wreden felt to deliver another hit game after *The Stanley Parable.* ■

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

A peculiar experience that's personal, sincere, and full of questions to unpack, though it asks them far too bluntly.

69

ROLL FOR INNOVATION

SWORD COAST LEGENDS sits in the shadows of the thriving RPG genre.

By Angus Morrison

Classic RPGs excel in their incidental details: isometric, often pausable and tooltip-heavy, they all allow you time to drink in your surroundings, describing in text what third- or first-person epics struggle to convey. A bland stone texture might become 'a mossy slab, worn by the passing of lonely centuries', or perhaps 'a toothy monolith casting a chill black shadow', or, in *Sword Coast Legends*' case, just another piece of repeating hallway.

Legends is an RPG set in the world of Dungeons & Dragons – the grandad of the genre. If any game can capture the essence of dice-based roleplaying it ought to be this one. Sadly, it's out-innovated by almost every RPG since the Kickstarting frenzy began.

It's solid enough, sure, but my head met the table with a thunk as the opening quests were unveiled: gather mushrooms, collect lost goods, find two missing persons. The later game throws in more interesting variations, such as killing off boss-level monsters, rescuing captives and performing occult rituals, but the formulaic introduction is agonising, dragging on for several hours of goblin-infested caves and ooze-riddled sewers.

In RPGs, quantity and quality can be hard to tell apart, but *Sword Coast Legends* almost certainly goes for the former. Points of interest are separated by gulfs of filler – there's always five packs of goblins too many, one more copy-pasted mausoleum to be explored or some artificial MacGuffin to gather before you're rationed another chunk of story. And *Legends* is horribly aware of this shortcoming: at one point, you're given the dialogue option, "Let me guess: she's holed up in one of three locations, and we have to figure out which one." It's a running joke with no punch line, because no matter how often *Legends* acknowledges its aged quest structure, it doesn't let up.

I was prepared to give it some license to recycle fantasy clichés – if D&D didn't invent them, it's certainly responsible for mashing them together into game format. In many ways, however, *Legends* is a step back from its pen-and-paper inspirations. Though it opens up in its second act (the BioWare-brand companion loyalty quests were a highlight), whatever quest you pursue gives you no leeway to improvise.

Contrast this with *Divinity: Original Sin*, which gives you a high-level objective and just leaves you to it, free to smash through doors, break chests and interact with everything to solve it. Two years ago, *Legends* would have been in the vanguard of the RPG resurgence, but we're past that now. This is once more a competitive genre that demands new ideas.

> ## In many ways *Legends* is a step back from its inspirations

The game is pretty enough, sure. It's unoriginal – again – tied to the fields, forests, cities and sewers of its source material, but rendered with flair, rejecting the simpler style of *Original Sin* or the pre-rendered backdrops of *Pillars of Eternity* in favour of a realistic 3D approach. Insofar as Dungeons & Dragons can ever be realistic, of course.

PARTY PEOPLE

Drop-in, drop-out co-op works without a hitch too, which was a concern when the release date was first pushed back. Given how combat works, though, I can't recommend playing with strangers on anything but easy. It's not strictly turn-based: the party wades in as one, with a global cooldown between each character's swings or spells, and anyone you're not currently controlling takes care of themselves with pre-set tactics. The active pause is disabled by default in co-op, which makes manipulating more than one character at once, and thus strategising, nigh impossible. The AI-controlled party members could be worse, although their tendency to burn big cooldowns to heal a scratch or put a single foe to sleep can scupper grand plans.

Dungeon Master mode displays a similar lack of ambition. You can build a complex cave network for players to pit themselves against, but you're limited to the same quest structures as the campaign, making it hard to craft anything truly personal.

I had the odd technical hiccup, including slight input delay and stuttering, but *Sword Coast Legends* functions for the duration, reliably and all too predictably. The last thing a game of Dungeons & Dragons should be is unadventurous. ∎

ROLEPLAY BY NUMBERS

Parts of Legends *seem mighty familiar*

NIGHTMARES OF WORLD-ENDING EVIL
Most RPGs do this, to be fair, but here the big bad is just a monologuing demon.

BRITISH ACCENTS
All of them, with some Irish thrown in for good measure. I even had a South London dwarf I picked up along the way.
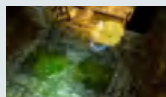
SEWERS
We get that sewers are great secret entryways, and that oozy things live there, but please, no more brown corridors.
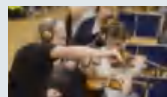
SWEEPING ORCHESTRAL SCORE
It's genuinely top-of-the-range questing music from Inon Zur himself, just to be clear.

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

A straightforward missions-and-monsters cliché that feels out of place riding the new wave of RPGs on PC.

55

Don't do this.

Dungeon master at work.

Occasionally charming, the scenery is still painfully static.

It's not exactly prosaic.

Count on this game to force you to take the long way round.

FANTASTIC VOYAGE

Can you make it around the world in just **80 DAYS**?

By Andy Kelly

Y ou, Jean Passepartout, have come into the service of one Phileas Fogg, an English gentleman who has hired you to be his valet. But your duties go beyond trimming his moustache and starching his collar: you have to help your new master circumnavigate the world in just eighty days. Mon dieu! A massive wager of £20,000 is riding on the success of this expedition, not to mention Fogg's reputation, but can it be done?

80 Days is a mostly text-based game. You plot your route across a 3D globe, and as you move between destinations, events occur that you intervene in by selecting certain actions or dialogue options. What makes it special is the sheer variety of outcomes and routes, and the quality of the writing, which is outstanding throughout.

Like Jules Verne's novel, the story takes place in the 1800s – but the game adds its own unique sci-fi twist. As well as trains, boats and cars, you'll travel in gyrocopters, hovercraft, airships, and other, stranger modes of transport that I'll let you discover for yourself. It's a stylish marriage of real history and science fiction, and the fantastical setting means you're never quite sure what will happen next.

Early on, the train from London to Paris suddenly sprouts fins and plunges into the chilly depths of the English Channel. But amphibious locomotives are only the tip of the iceberg. You'll encounter mechanical gondoliers in Venice, witness technological marvels at the World's Fair, fly on giant mechanical birds, and see all manner of bizarre, wonderful things.

The challenge lies in choosing the fastest, most efficient route – but this is made difficult by several factors woven brilliantly into the narrative. Hotels and travel cost money, and managing your budget is a constant worry. Fogg's health will suffer if a journey is too strenuous, affecting your ability to take certain routes.

And misfortune befalls poor Passepartout on a regular basis. You'll be robbed, thrown in jail, and accused of murder. Your airship will crash in the middle of the Pacific or you'll anger a tribe on some remote island. There are countless ways to get into trouble, which can cost you money and time. But that's all part of the fun. You probably won't make the trip in eighty days the first time you play it, but you'll still have amazing stories to tell. The deadline isn't as important as the title suggests.

Fogg is, initially, hard to like. He rarely speaks and seemingly shows no interest in the amazing things you encounter. He is completely unflappable; the quintessential

> **It's the story of a modest valet becoming a man of the world**

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE

English gentleman. But in certain perilous situations, you'll see his human side emerge, briefly. There's a remarkable amount of nuance in the storytelling and characterisation. The people you meet are fascinating and richly painted, making it all the more devastating when, inevitably, you have to leave them behind.

80 Days can be funny, poignant, and bittersweet. It can be sad, scary, exciting, and sentimental. It all depends on the path you take and the choices you make. The story deals with issues such as racism and colonialism far more intelligently than most games. Every trip is a whirlwind of emotions, and by the end you feel you've been on a personal, as well as physical, journey.

RETURN TRIP

And because there are so many branching paths, it's extremely replayable. I've gone around the world seven times now, and every journey has felt like a new experience. Every time you complete a circumnavigation, additional stories and events unlock, giving you even more incentive to try again. It's also brilliantly accessible and easy to play, making it the perfect game to share with someone who never, or rarely, plays games. That doesn't mean it's a walk in the park: getting around the world in eighty days (without using a certain shortcut) is a challenge.

Passepartout is the real star. It's the story of a modest valet from France becoming an experienced man of the world, and sharing that with him is a joy. There are genuinely touching, heartfelt moments – and some terrifying ones – all brought to life by exquisite, artful prose. It really feels like an adventure, and a voyage into the unknown. ■

PACK YOUR BAGS
Essential items for the gentleman traveller

COLD COMPRESS
For soothing aching, tired muscles.

RUSSIAN TRAIN TIMETABLE
There are a lot of rail routes in Russia. This has them all.

ENGLISH POETRY
Poems by Percy Shelley to help you pass the time.

.45 CALIBRE RIFLE
You never know when you'll run into an angry bear.

EVENING JACKET
Use your English charm to negotiate better ticket prices.

DRIVING CAP
Keeps your head warm if you have to travel by car.

PC GAMER — **VERDICT**

One of the best story-driven games on PC. Beautifully written, effortlessly charming, thrillingly unpredictable.

91

This shortcut via Cambridge can be a real time saver.

BEDOUIN EXPEDITION

A famous train.

There's a lot of amazing stuff to discover out there.

Air travel can be dangerous.

You can meet Jules Verne himself.

I'm sorry to let you down, sir.

I lost a frontal lobe solving this one.

The robots are taking over.

A massive army of machines has surrounded the city.

Yes, that photo looks just like you.

Employee 1
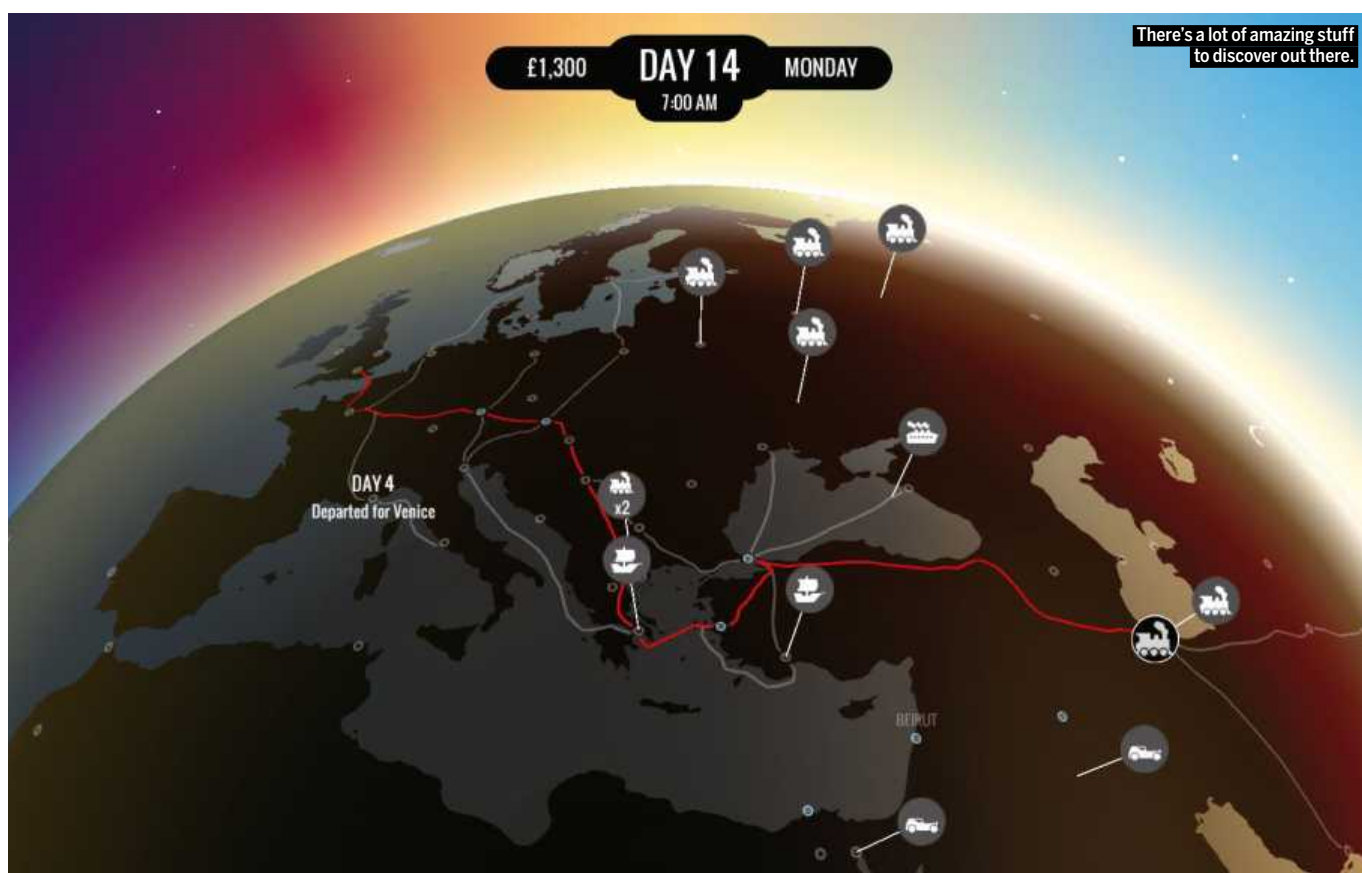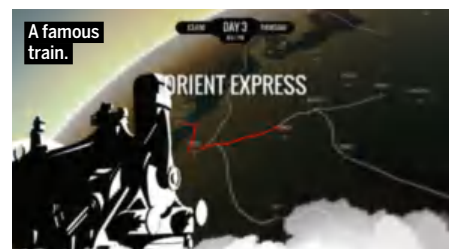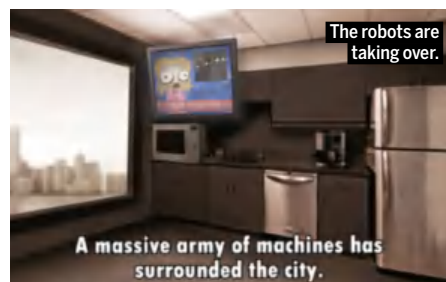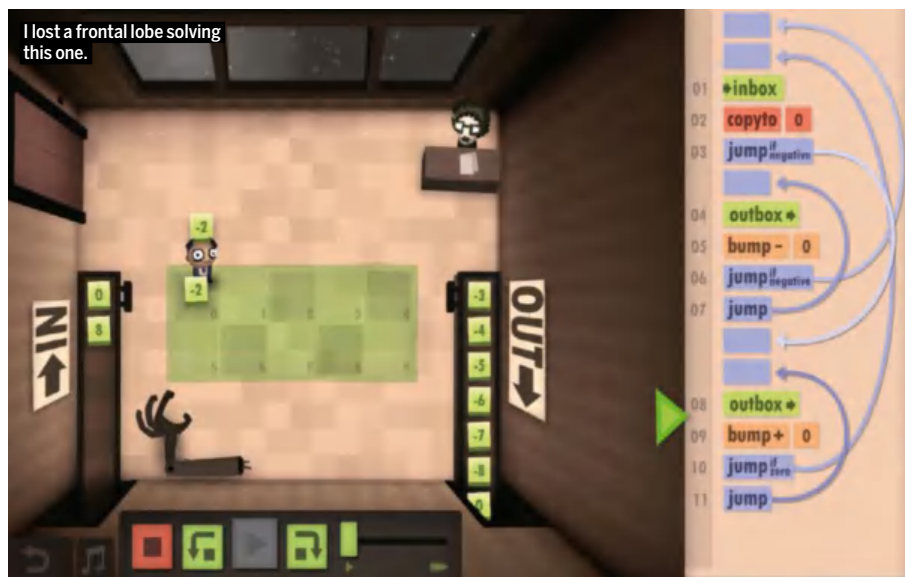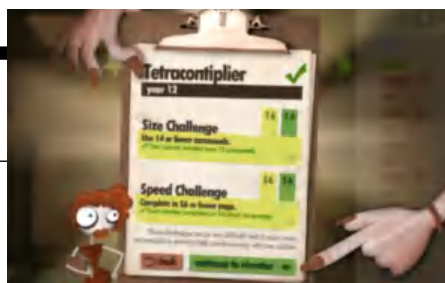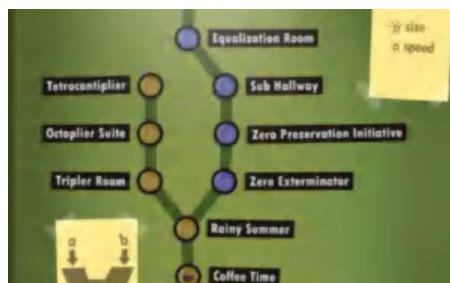
CORPORATE SUBDIVISION

HUMAN RESOURCE MACHINE has assigned you mandatory training. *By Angus Morrison*

Human Resource Machine **makes me feel less like the faceless workforce drone I'm supposed to be and more like the class dunce. Far from a dead-end job, it recognises my efforts in rudimentary coding and rewards me with promotions that offer more challenging puzzles. Trouble is, I'm not smart enough to rise far beyond the janitorial division. After a gentle introduction, it quickly becomes an uncompromising maths exam.**

Resource Machine joins games like *else Heart.Break()* and *The Magic Circle* in letting you play God with its behaviours. In this case you use rudimentary commands like 'inbox', 'copyto', 'add', 'bump' or 'jump' to command your minion to take numbers or letters from the inbox, process them according to the demands of your job, and dump the result in the outbox. It's a disarmingly simple toolbox, and for the first few years (levels) on the job I found myself longing for a bit more bite.

The challenge ramps up but the toolbox stays the same, and there's the source of the spectacular mental gymnastics that later puzzles require. Your first hint is when it asks you to multiply each inbox number by a set value such as 40 – without a multiply function. A little factoring, however,

and you're set, adding each number to itself, and then the sum to itself the appropriate number of times.

HRM awards marks for elegance, and that means setting up jump loops: 'jump', 'jump if zero', 'jump if negative'. Many times I would have killed for a 'jump if positive', but the HR department is big on efficiency. Using fewer commands and taking fewer steps to achieve the goal is a must for 100% completion, and in that regard this game is an excellent introduction to rudimentary programming, instilling the mantra that sprawling, ungainly code is almost as bad as no code at all.

Once you start nesting jump loops within one another, the end goal quickly becomes obscured. *HRM* demands a diligent, analytical mind to understand its puzzles and keep

A more contextualised game might have been a better idea

track of their solutions using its handwritten comment system.

Later, indirect access and key-value data pairs feature, both vital components of the coder's utility belt and useful to learn, but perhaps to the point where a little grounding in the theory beforehand would serve the novice in good stead.

And there's the issue: *HRM* never presents itself as anything but pedagogic. It has some dark jokes – each year your hair thins a little more and your bosses are steadily replaced by robots – but it doesn't capitalise on the office setting. Ultimately you're just adding numbers to other numbers. If you really wanted to attract noobs to coding, a more contextualised game might have been a better idea than this extended session of Numberwang.

It's impossible that a beginner could escape *Resource Machine* unenlightened, but the game is so insistent about it that this employee ended up a slave to The Man. ∎

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

A technically excellent educational game for teaching low-level programming, but dry for all but maths boffins.

75

techradar.

The home of technology

techradar.com

The backdrops show something pretty bad has happened.
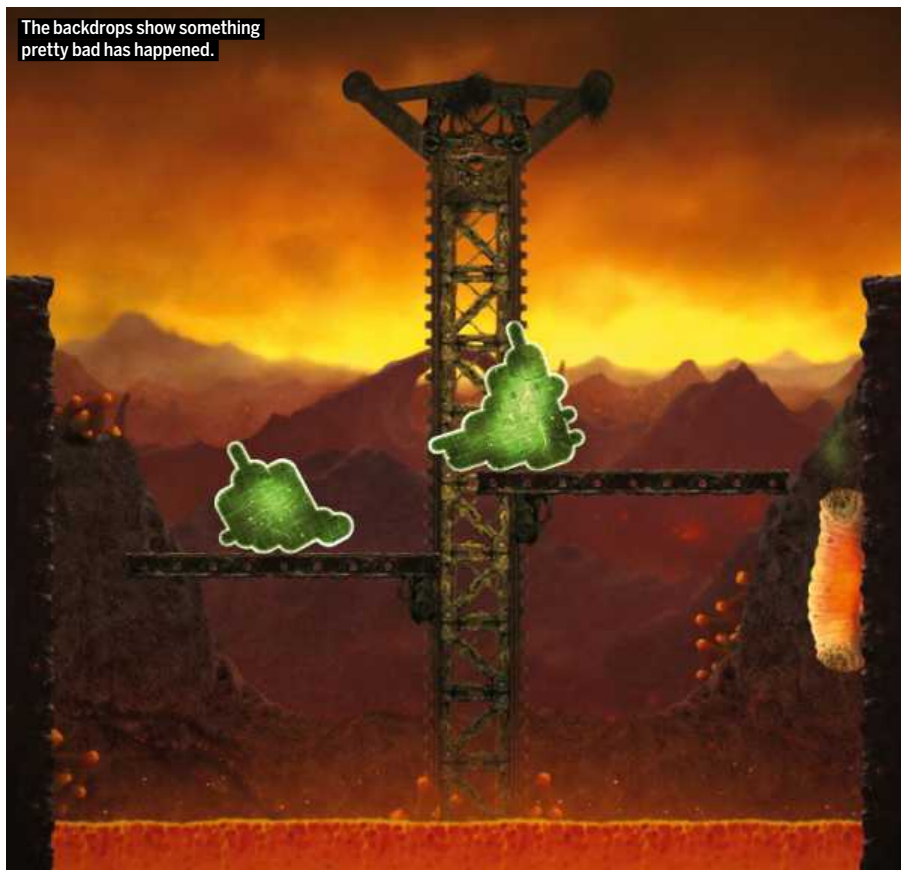
It's never boring when your sporing.
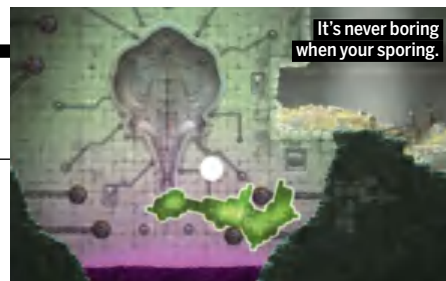
Rate of growth can be problematic.
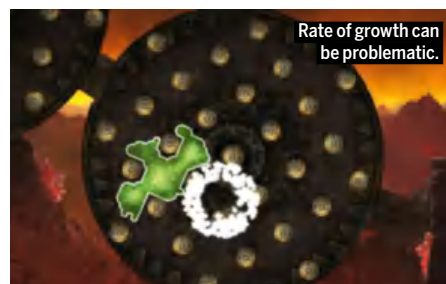
Top Gun, meet Top Fungi.

MUSH PLAY

Challenge and intrigue sprout from **MUSHROOM 11**'s glob of fungus. *By Edwin Evans-Thirlwell*

You've ridden minecarts in games before, but I'm betting you've never ridden one as a squirming fungal blob, its flanks clamped haphazardly around the sides of the car as it corkscrews through a hellscape of rusting pylons and lava. Likewise, you've probably crossed your fair share of collapsing rope bridges, but have you ever done so by squishing yourself flat to lower your centre of gravity, one appendage oozing tentatively out?

Mushroom 11's movement mechanics are a glorious, if occasionally maddening contribution to platform game design. They're also a gentle meditation on the survival of individuals versus the collective: the protagonist is a culture in a couple of senses, surging and tumbling through the wreckage of our own.

This is a platform-puzzler spanning seven chapters in which you move by very carefully destroying yourself. The game's star, if that's the right word, is a colony of cells that grows rapidly to a fixed volume, provided it's touching something solid. Clench the left mouse button and the cursor swells to an eraser, enabling you to shave away one side of the blob so that it expands, and thus travels, in the other direction, moulding itself around contours and absorbing

nearby lifeforms (read: collectables). You can fine-tool it with a smaller eraser, and even subdivide it.

It's an unintuitive yet extraordinarily flexible system that serves as the basis for some great, original puzzles, plus a few clever variations on concepts from more traditional platformers. Crucial to most of these conundrums is the understanding that the fungus is 99% expendable: as long as a single particle survives it'll bubble back up to full size, like Dracula resurrecting from a drop of blood. A frequent gambit is thus to sculpt the entity into a gelatinous scaffold, easing nodules of fungus into crevices to anchor it while extending a tendril towards a ledge, only to then lop free the tip and cheerfully sacrifice the remainder. There's real genius to how

As long as a single particle survives, it'll bubble back up to full size

Untame has programmed the blob's ability to self-propagate – you have no direct control over but most of the time it's clear which bits you need to kill to grow in a particular direction.

Where things get tricky, a little to the game's detriment, is with puzzles that involve moving mechanisms. These range from slaughterhouse production lines to the bosses – freakish graduates of the Capcom school of design, all weaponised appendages, pattern behaviour and bulbous weakspots.

Getting to the end is a bittersweet process in which you play the part of both saviour and devastator – an emotive trajectory that delivers *Mushroom 11* into the company of *Braid* and *Limbo*, even as the mechanics call to mind *World of Goo*. It's a game that manages to be both amusing and solemn, without so much as a scrap of direct exposition, and while the difficulty steepens a little too sharply in the second half, it's a game you'd be foolish to miss. ■

PC GAMER | **VERDICT**

Original and a smart physics puzzler, but aggravating in places, *Mushroom 11* falls a few inches short of a classic.

85

Borderlands' art style is a natural fit for Telltale.

"You hit the stockbroker for +10 damage."

DRONE 678-9 / ACQUIRING TARGET...

If you want to be a con artist, Fiona, don't dress like one.

SWELLTALE

TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS is an excellent return to comedy by Telltale. *By Tyler Wilde*

Tales is a story adventure spin-off that balances *Borderlands'* urge to be impressed with itself for using swears with some great new characters and a tinge of sincerity. It's not *serious*, but finds its levity through character-driven jokes more than screaming violence. Telltale has created a standalone comedy adventure that succeeds because of great storytelling, not 'psycho midgets' or freaking Claptrap. There's no Claptrap at all, unless you choose him.

I love the main characters – Fiona and Rhys – who are sardonic, conflicted, and cute but not nauseatingly so. They're a funny, self-interested pair with questionable morals – almost, but not quite a cheeseball bickering anime duo. They're both on shady ground when they meet, Fiona running a scam with her sister Sasha, and Rhys trying to screw over his corporate Hyperion boss with his best friend Vahn. They all end up running around the dangerous, alien world of Pandora searching for one of its legendary vaults, getting into death races with bandits, meeting robots, exploring ruins, and struggling to balance their ambitions with their consciences – which is where we interact.

As usual with Telltale, most of *Tales* is about making quick decisions and reacting to on-screen prompts. Your decisions alter details and let you define the context of the characters' actions. You adjust how they perceive the story, and if they can say, at the end, that they acted out of pragmatism or compassion.

Rhys, for instance, can choose to reject his desire for corporate power, or team up with a violent voice in his head and try to install himself as king. Fiona can forgive the mentor who betrays her, or let him die.

I like the format, but I was a bit disappointed that Telltale didn't deviate too much from its other games. It's mostly familiar: shift the tone of a conversation, choose to lie or tell the truth, make a binary choice here and there, and awkwardly poke around small areas until you've looked at everything. I was hoping

> **Often, the humour and direction are just fun to be a part of**

that manually trying to use items on things in the environment would surprise me, for instance, but I never found that it did anything.

The action, as usual, is mostly about pressing a key when prompted, or clicking on the thing that needs shooting. It's not challenging and really, it lacks everything I typically like about games: rules to learn and exploit, decision-making and strategy. But often, the humour and direction are just fun to be a part of, like the time pressing 'W' caused Rhys to unintentionally gut a monster and cover himself with entrails.

There are five episodes, each around 90 minutes long. I didn't love the second episode – there's some awkward 'exploration' and a few jokes that fell flat for me – but as a whole I recommend it highly. Even when I felt like I ought to roll my eyes at a weak joke, I liked the cast too much to want to. *Tales from the Borderlands* is a great game, even if you don't care about *Borderlands*. ■

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

Tales from the Borderlands is one of the funniest, best-acted storytelling games this year.

89

WIN!
A BB-8 DROID

To celebrate the release of **Star Wars: The Force Awakens, we are giving readers the chance to win one of five BB-8 droids by Sphero.**

With this gadget you can design a route for BB-8 and control from your smart device. You can also create and send holographic videos.

BB-8 will learn to recognise your voice, and adapt personality as you interact.

Who wouldn't want one?

All you have to do to be in with a chance of owning one of these remarkable gadgets is answer the following question:

WHAT EPISODE IS STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS?

A. VII   **B.** VI   **C.** IV

ENTER ONLINE NOW FOR FREE AT
www.futurecomps.co.uk/WIN-BB8

Civilization: Beyond Earth – Rising Tide

BRAVE OLD WORLD

CIVILIZATION: BEYOND EARTH – RISING TIDE doesn't quite lift all boats.

By Richard Cobbett

Even hardcore fans mostly agree that if *Beyond Earth* taught us anything, it's that you've got to go further than merely another solar system to escape the shadow of *Alpha Centauri*. With that in mind, *Rising Tide* is a smartly put together expansion. It doesn't make *Beyond Earth* the game that many of us wanted, but it does at least tackle the biggest disappointments instead of simply bolting on a few more toys and random cool features.

One of the changes I most appreciate is the reworking of Affinities. In the original *Beyond Earth*, these had your society developing down one of three paths – Purity, Supremacy or Harmony. I loathed this, because it felt less like charting a future for humanity than signing it up to one of three dogmatic space cults, complete with silly space robes. *Rising Tide* enables hybrid Affinities. This opens up new options, but more than that, it feels endlessly more appropriate. Why wouldn't you combine technology and aliens? It's just slightly morbid common sense.

This is essentially *Rising Tide*'s approach across the board – big changes, but not necessarily dramatic changes that completely overhaul what came before. It's a more appropriate title than it might sound, and not really referring to the new aquatic cities. Although these are fun to play with: you can now acquire territory by moving around the ocean, and they're a rare example of something feeling like future tech instead of just modern military equipment with a chrome finish.

Similar offerings include four new factions (one sea based, totally unlike *Alien Crossfire*, one spy based, totally unlike *Alien Crossfire*, and two others focused on diplomacy and production respectively). Worlds are now peppered with Artifacts that can be combined in threes to unlock bonuses, and new Marvels: huge alien structures that start quests for everyone once discovered. Neither cancels out the basic problem of these worlds usually looking like

Earth if our canyons were randomly full of melted cheese, but they're decent low impact additions that contribute to the feel of a series finally heading in the right direction.

HOUSE OF CARDS

That direction being *Alpha Centauri*, it's no surprise that the diplomacy section has seen the biggest overhaul. The new system has two goals: to make things more transparent, and to give leaders more personality. Unfortunately, while they do have more of this than they did, *Beyond Earth* continues to be more comfortable with the numbers side of its humans than their humanity.

> It makes them seem more like stalkers than rival faction leaders

The big difference is that now you're constantly sent communiqués from factions, commenting on just about everything you do and how you're doing and how they feel about it in ways that make them seem more like stalkers than rival faction leaders.

I like the idea of all this. It's the right kind of thinking. In this incarnation, however, it feels uncomfortable – a concept that never gets to the part where the leaders seem real in the way that Deirdre, Miriam, Yang and co somehow managed with just a few Mad Libs way back in 1999.

The more mechanical side works better. Each faction now has a Fear and Respect bar, the first based on your strength and the latter on how your actions mesh with your philosophies. Everyone also has Traits that offer direct upgrades, and advantages that others can buy into using the new Diplomatic Capital resource – a stipend each turn in exchange for a boost. You can have up to four in play, and swap them out, as well as spend DC to purchase units and buildings outright. Combined, all this opens up a much more interesting diplomatic metagame of mutual favours and reasons to side with specific leaders, without ruling out making deals with assorted devils if the need arises. It's also now much easier to read leaders, and see when you're clashing with someone or they're likely to bail on a deal.

Rising Tide doesn't turn *Beyond Earth* into a whole new game. Expect that, and you'll be disappointed. It does however move it closer to what it should have been. It's the expansion they needed to do first, both in terms of building on the game, and in showing that the series has the right course in mind. ∎

POLITICAL SHADING
Rising Tide's new hybrid Affinities

PURITY /HARMONY
Human perfection through alien gene splicing. Don't scratch your head thinking about it. It might be a claw now.

PURITY
Humans are best. Wanna fight about it?

SUPREMACY /PURITY
There's a place for high technology. It's not in your body. It's in your enemies. Fired at high velocity.

HARMONY
Master your surroundings. Make it call you Master.

HARMONY /SUPREMACY
Would a robot leg make you a better person? How about tentacles? We're not fussy.

SUPREMACY
Building a better you, whether you like it or not.

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

73

A solid expansion addressing the right problems, but still shackled by the choices of the core game.

Aliens can be so disgusting. Burn them all.
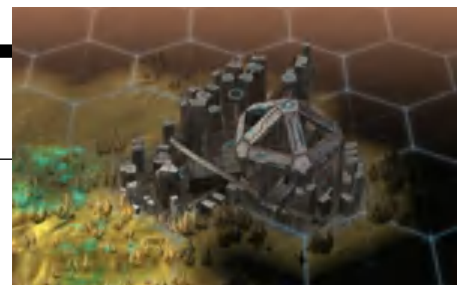
Frigid and Primeval worlds have tougher aliens.

It still takes too long to get the future toys.

If only acquiring personality traits was this easy in real life.

Some of the most fun units combine aliens and tech. And victory.

CREEPER HIT

MINECRAFT: STORY MODE might delight diehard *Minecraft* fans, but it's far from Telltale's best form. *By Tyler Wilde*

Minecraft: Story Mode is Telltale's story adventure spin-off of *Minecraft,* and it works like the dev's other games – timed dialogue options, binary decisions, awkward walking, and mashing 'Q' to do things, which hasn't been novel since the first season of *The Walking Dead.* It's the writing, characters and art that have made Telltale's games great in recent years, and they just keep delivering. Except for this one.

Minecraft: Story Mode's voice acting is good and there's a cute pig. I like the pig. But the dialogue isn't especially funny, and the world is about as developed as *Minecraft*'s world. Our heroes are supposed to be young people (as if you can tell the age of one of these block monsters) going on a Goonies-like adventure, but I don't know anything about their lifestyle or society. Do they have parents? Do they live in cities or just in whatever block houses they can pile up in forests and caves? Do they do anything but prepare for the yearly building competition? That's all these characters seem to know about: the legendary heroes who defeated the Ender Dragon and the big building competition.

In this bland world, the stakes seem to be that a *Minecraft* server (which everyone popped into a couple of months ago) is in peril. Our heroes, who have no responsibilities and nothing to lose, must leave behind a crappy tree house and convention centre to save it.

As usual, there's a little bit of walking around, but it's awkward and uses invisible walls to contain you. And, also as expected, the action isn't very fun. It's just a case of walk towards a monster, swing your sword, or press WASD at the right time to dodge things. I wanted to be impressed by the world and camera direction and funny quips, which is the stuff that makes *Tales from the Borderlands*' action interesting, but I just didn't find any of the characters funny, or any of the scenes exciting. Our heroes are exposed to plenty of peril, but these Lego-heads are so clueless about their own world I find it hard to believe that they survive daily life. And riding a minecart track through the Nether doesn't feel big and adventurous because, well, it's *Minecraft*.

And it's ugly. *Minecraft* is beautiful because it's this vast, primitive

> ## It's mostly characters talking out of their hideous mouths

blockscape full of potential, where distant mountains are an adventure and a sweet little valley is a cute place for a cabin. *Story Mode* zooms in on it, filling the frame with ugly pixel mosaics and blurry details. It's mostly close-ups on characters talking out of their hideous mouths and they're not cute. I don't feel like they should have human voices. It works in *Minecraft,* but not here.

This is also the most technically flawed Telltale game I've played. It crashed four times, losing my progress, and had a few graphical glitches. But even ignoring that, I'm starting to wonder if it just wasn't a good idea to make a *Minecraft* adventure game. The world feels freshly made and without character, and there's no good way for it to reflect its source material's values. When it winks at building and crafting, I just feel constrained, like I've been strapped to a camera dolly. I might be somewhere magical, but I can't turn my head to look at it.

BLOCKY START

Story Mode can get better, certainly, but Telltale usually impresses with its first episode – it has since *The Walking Dead* – and this was a drag. I'm in the minority on this, I'm sure, as *Minecraft* fans may well be delighted by more *Minecraft,* and Telltale fans get more Telltale. The game has building montages and a headstrong hero, goofs about chickens and a choice of who to save – *Minecraft* and Telltale, mashed together on a crafting table. But I found that the best parts of each were lost in the transmogrification.

Other than the pig – the pig is cute – *Story Mode*'s first episode did nothing for me. It's out now, but I recommend waiting for a few more episodes before committing to the whole season. ∎

PORK-TRAIT GALLERY

The many faces of Ruben the pig, as I interpret them
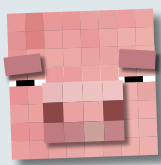
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Highly critical of this game's premise.	Angry that pigs have human ears for some reason.	Horrified that shadows are higher res than textures.	Eyes disappeared.	A *Minecraft* fan reading this review.
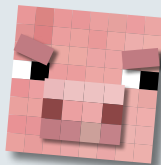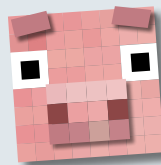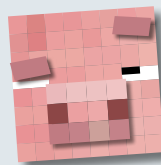
PC GAMER **VERDICT**

A disappointing mismatch. It can get better, but so far *Minecraft: Story Mode* is just boring and ugly.

Looking at scenes like this for 90 minutes depleted all the moisture in my eyes.

Asshole Beanie Guy will remember this.
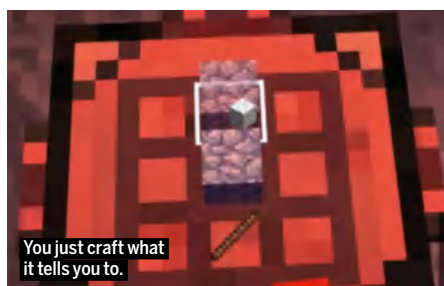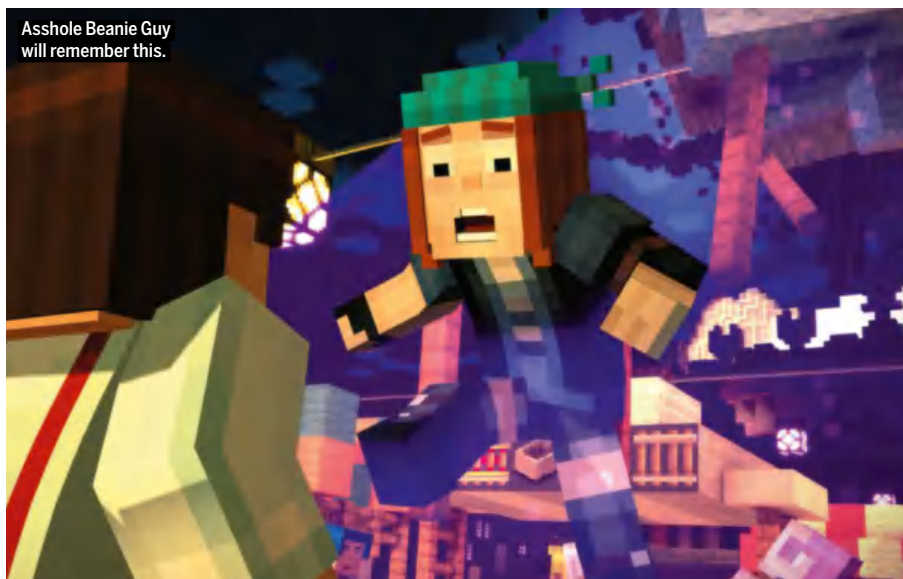
You just craft what it tells you to.

Choose Your Appearance
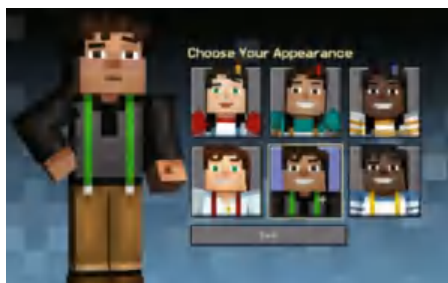
Important decisions are what Telltale games are all about.

Fighting is slightly more complex than usual for Telltale, but not any fun.

Blackmail and sex shaming. Boo! BOOOO.

Positioning the cursor is the most fun activity.

Your cursor is uninhibited, and follows her kinks.
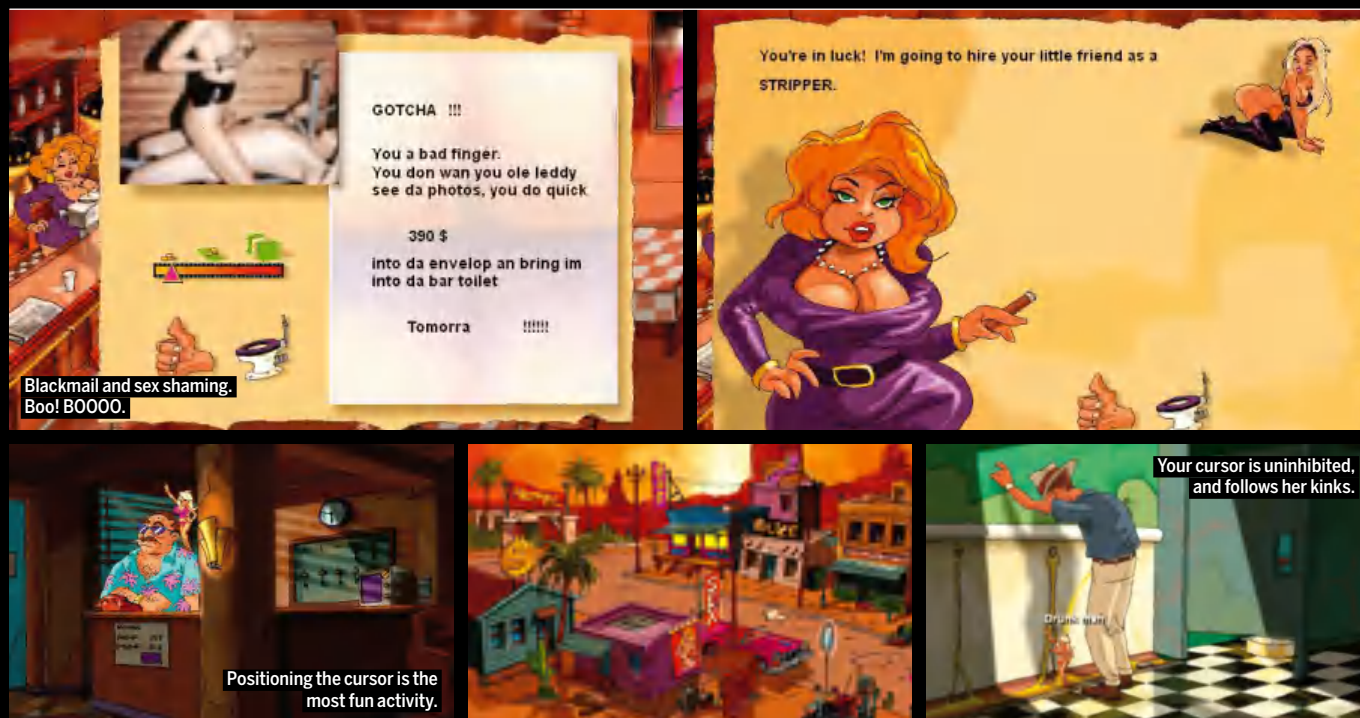
OH, LOWLY LULA

Why LULA: THE SEXY EMPIRE is the most culturally important game in the world

I don't know about you, but when a game like this pops into my peripheral vision, I find myself unbuckled and mashing at the mangled area between my legs with both palms, even before I've turned to face it. I'm simply enormously keen on sex, and there is nothing sexier than a sort-of tycoon game that almost features depictions of the sex acts I like. But I'm not just in it for sex. Because Western videogames that trade on lovely sex are always funny, too.

This is for two reasons: one, because we're not comfortable with sex. Not everyone can pulp themselves into an urgent white froth over a couple of pink pixels, so the odd joke makes us all feel better about our red raw nubs, as we enter our ninth hour of fruitless edging.

Second, because sex is innately stupid. It's like God programmed an army of robots to roll around on the floor, with their legs all oily, urgently pulling faces that seem to be expressing every emotion at once. If you don't laugh at sex, you're either consumed with rage about how much you're getting, or, I dunno, you might be good at it. Anyway, I'm digressing hard: my point is, videogames are the best possible medium through which to enjoy sex.

You click a lot in *Lula*, and the cursor is Lula herself. This celebrates womanhood in a powerful way. Just as our mothers guided us through infancy, Lula now takes the baton, shepherding us through the minefield of puberty. When Cursor Lula hovers over an interactive object, her clothes disappear. This makes us respect her more: she is going without one of life's essentials to offer us help. She is more noble, more useful, than Venus de Milo, who was notoriously crap at pointing at anything.

Before starting the game proper, why not head to the motel and pay $100 to click on a lady as she cycles through her poses? You even click on her with your little lady cursor, who, as noted, gets her bosom out. This is a strong, feminist celebration of lesbian love that doesn't respect the sizeist culture that says women whose mass differs by a factor of

> **The cursor is Lula herself. This celebrates womanhood in a powerful way**

more than 8000 shouldn't caress each other. Also, there are nipples. And who doesn't like lovely nipples? Misogynists, is who. (And don't talk to me about men's nipples – those barren, vestigial parodies. Can't you let women have ONE THING, men?)

This high art, this spearhead of modernity, this culmination of everything the women's movement has slowly been fighting towards, this terrible game that's made me write so many paragraphs of rubbish that I no longer know my own opinion. I'm surely setting the stage for a score way above 97. It'd take serious mitigating factors to drop it below 98.

Sadly, it's a terrible tycoon game, it's agonisingly unsexy to anyone who enjoys human shapes that exist, and the jokes fail so completely that it's hard to recognise one as it limps by. We live in an era where 'Lemon Stealing Whores' is an actual porn movie. So, we're done, right? Videogames can just leave sexual humour to the porn stars, now. ∎

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

So close to a modern retro masterpiece, yet so impossibly far in every conceivable and measurable way.

15

WII U MAD?

ANGRY VIDEO GAME NERD ADVENTURES is a good square peg in a good round hole

In the review for *1001 Spikes* below, I had a go at algorithms. In an attempt to placate the algorithm gods that silently rule our lives, I decided to re-review the first game on my computer-generated Steam Discovery Queue. Let magazine content be chosen by the inscrutable formulae and backroom deals of society's secret architects! So mote it be!

Weirdly – or not so weirdly, since I'd just been playing it – Steam chose a game not unlike *1001 Spikes*. *AVGNA* is another human-designed, wilfully annoying platformer. Only where *Spikes* stems your anger by making you suspect that it was probably your fault, *AVGNA* just pretends to be angrier than you could possibly be.

It's a missed chance, because the web series that inspired the game is actually way more sophisticated than the game implies. In the videos,

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Another one of those retro 2D platformers that prides itself on difficulty.

EXPECT TO PAY
£2.80

DEVELOPER
Freakzone Games

PUBLISHER
ScrewAttack Entertainment

MULTIPLAYER
None

FIRST REVIEWED
N/A

LINK
www.facebook.com/AVGNGame

Inspired by justice, expressed by snotbubble.

AVGN's anger comes out of love, and he frequently expresses that love without anger. This game is just a sweary protagonist who hates the game he's in. Basically, the devs get to parody anger by replicating it, and ridicule platforming tropes by replicating them. That's two cakes they've had and eaten, right in front of your astonished face.

This doesn't make the game bad. It's a decent retro 2D platformer. The controls are tight, and there are enough lives to make you reckless to begin with, before sorting your act out when you try to finish all the worlds in one run. It's just a shame that the Nerd and the platformer don't do each other justice here. ∎

71

If you've moved an inch, it's time to die.

1001 SPIKES

Platforming roguelikes are all very well and good, every playthrough familiar, yet creating surprising new stories. But there's also the pleasure of playing against the hand of a level designer, rather than an algorithm. Sometimes you want 'getting better' to just mean getting further, instead of slightly more equipped to start a new story. The basic platforming of *1001 Spikes* is dense, so dense, with traps, but sophisticated enough that death is maddening but never cheap. Well, yes, death is cheap – you've 1,001 lives, for God's sake – but never unfair. It gets a bit samey towards the end, but that balance of arrgh, uurrgh and oooh is cheerfully well-tuned for hours. ∎

77

When console and screenshot keys collide.

QUAKE II

All children should be kept away from modern videogames until they have been forced to experience them all, in order, one by one, starting with *Pong*. That way, they will get to feel a thousand joys of discovery, instead of being ruined as a baby with *Infinity Blade* on a saliva-smeared iPad. I just don't see how anyone can enjoy the thrill of these yesterday games without feeling the newness they represented at the time. When the number of polygons they had was part of the unquestioned march towards photorealism, instead of an informative history lesson. Anyway, if you must: for multiplayer go *Quake III Arena*, and for singleplayer, just *Doom* it. ∎

68

Fine for young children or your mum.

PAJAMA SAM: GAMES TO PLAY ON ANY DAY

When I was eleven, I mourned the lack of friends willing to play Monopoly with me, and roleplayed all six. On the upside, it did equip me to enjoy this collection of *Pajama Sam*ified boardgames, at least before I reminded myself that I was playing Snakes and Ladders against myself, and Draughts against a floret of broccoli. Good for kids, but *42 All-Time Classics* is a tenner on Nintendo DS. ∎

72
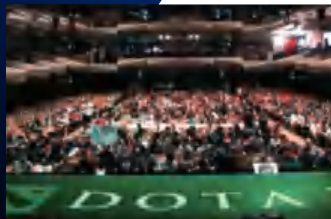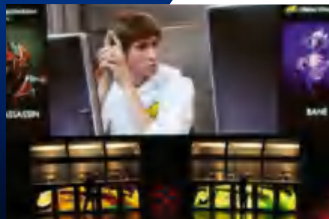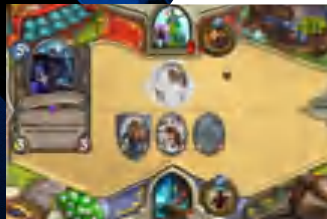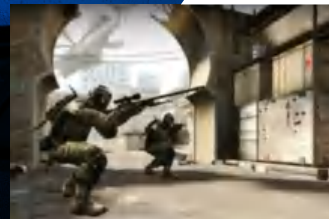
HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

The Strix Tactic Pro approaches keyboard design from many angles.

GROUP TEST

By Dave James

GAMING
KEYBOARDS

Pick the perfect keyboard for your PC

Q&A

What kinds of keyboard are available?
It all comes down to the key switches. Mechanical switches have several different parts. A membrane switch is just a layer of rubber covering switches on the circuit board itself. A scissor switch is similar but has a plastic mechanism between the key and rubber for feedback.

Which is best?
For gaming you want every keypress registered and WASD keys that won't wear out in a year. That means getting mechanical switches.

Which ones?
Cherry MX Reds provide medium resistance, Black require more. At the actuation point, Browns provide a small tactile bump. Blues make a loud clicking sound.

What extras do I want?
Media controls, USB and audio passthrough are all very handy.

Dictionary

Actuation force – The pressure required to depress a key to the point where it activates its switch. Iimportant for the feel of the keyboard.

Rollover – How many key presses the keyboard/OS will register in order. A 10-key rollover means only ten keys will be registered, while N-key rollover will recognise every single button press.

Polling rate – How many times the OS checks to see if a key has been pressed in a second. With a 1000Hz polling rate it will check 1,000 times per second.

T he humble keyboard is one of the oldest forms of PC input, short of giving the Difference Engine a good, hard kick. Picking the right one for your gaming PC is a valid concern. It needs to be able to take a pounding, obviously, but unless you keep a dedicated keyboard for gaming, it needs to be comfortable for everyday use, too.
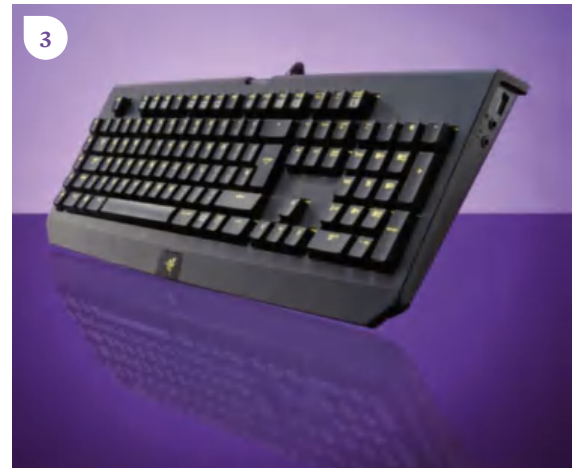
CORSAIR VENGEANCE K70

www.corsair.com **£101**

→ You don't always have to buy the very latest products to make sure you're getting the best. The classic Corsair K70 has been my favourite gaming keyboard since its release and that hasn't changed with this group test.

1 Despite Corsair releasing the RGB version and the new Strafe line, the original K70 is still the finest gaming keyboard around today. The simple, classic design has stood the test of time and the black, anodised aluminium still gives it an effortlessly cool look. And without the clear plastic under-switches of the RGB, the LED lighting is pleasingly restrained.

The K70 is also more feature-rich than its progeny. There's USB throughput, something the pricier RGB version inexplicably forgot in favour of flashy lighting effects, and there are excellent media controls, including a great volume scroll wheel.

So, it's got the form and function right, but what about the feel? The K70 is the only one in the Corsair line that will offer your choice of Red, Blue or Brown Cherry MX switches, and that covers almost the entire gamut of mechanical switch options, leaving out only the heavy Black keys.

The K70 is a great-looking, responsive and incredibly robust board, and is now particularly good value too.

92%

G.SKILL RIPJAWS KM780 RGB

www.gskill.com **£130**

→ "G.Skill makes memory, so what the hell is it doing branching out into peripherals?" ...is probably what Corsair's product managers were saying as G.Skill unveiled its funky new mechanical-switch board.

2 The Ripjaws KM780 is more showy than Corsair's relatively understated Vengeance, but its more industrial design is still far from over the top. The aluminium base plate is very reminiscent of the awesome K70, but has a surrounding bar to add another level of rigidity. And indeed, this is a superbly robust board – right up there with the Cherry MX Board 6.0 over the page.

It comes with the same level of media controls as the Corsair, even down to the volume scroll wheel. Of course, G.Skill had to go one better and added an illuminated volume level indicator beneath it. Going one better again it has both the audio and USB passthroughs that only the Roccat Ryos MK Pro has to offer in this test.

It really is a surprisingly excellent keyboard; I'd expected something with a lot more bluster and a lot less substance. The KM780 is responsive, feels great (if you go for the Red switches over the gritty Browns, anyway) and impressively feature rich.

90%

RAZER BLACKWIDOW CHROMA

www.razer.com **£125**

→ It's all about the lightshows these days, and Razer is not to be outdone with the Chroma version of its Blackwidow keyboard. Sporting the almost-standard 16.8 million colours in its LED backlighting, it's another gaming rainbow.

3

The Blackwidow is getting on in terms of design, but its solid basic build still makes for an excellent gaming board. It may be fully plastic, but it's an incredibly robust, thick and weighty plastic.

The big difference between Razer's board and all the others bar the Steelseries Apex, is that it doesn't use the ubiquitous Cherry MX switches. Razer has fitted the Blackwidow with its own Green switches which are more akin to Cherry MX Blue, with the clicky actuation noise. These are shallower to actuate, however, and can be double-pressed far easier than Blues. If you don't like the noise – I personally can't stand it – you can always go for the Stealth version which uses quieter Razer Orange.

The only sticking point with the Blackwidow Chroma – as with all iterations of this board – is that it's rather basic, aside from those extra macro buttons. There are no pass-through connections or media/volume controls. But it's typically responsive and colourful with its multi-coloured LED backlights.

86%

ASUS STRIX TACTIC PRO

www.asus.com **£100**

→ The pointy Strix is the keyboard a Klingon would love. So if you've kept up that *Star Trek Online* account it might be of interest, but is the angular black and orange aesthetic enough for everyone else?

4

Asus has borrowed from all corners to create its own gaming keyboard. Cast your eyes back to the Roccat board and you'll see some of its influence in the macro keys on the right-hand side and the three thumb buttons below the spacebar. It's also using similar media keys to the Corsair – a definite plus.

The Strix Tactic Pro is trying for the high-end premium market, but unfortunately falls short. It's missing both USB and audio passthrough from the feature list, and given the high asking price, that is definitely an issue. Additionally, the Pro doesn't feel particularly pleasing to the touch. You can pick your choice of the four Cherry MX switches to fit it with, but the overall feel of the board remains seriously plastic and echoing.

And finally, although the Tactic Pro may have more macro keys than you've got digits, the software isn't the most intuitive – strange for an Asus product. Despite the premium pricing this device doesn't have the premium feel I'd want for my keyboard.

73%

CHERRY MX BOARD 6.0

www.cherry.de **£132**

→ A keyboard from the company that makes practically all the best keyboard switches in the world. Surely Cherry must know a thing or two about making fantastic gaming keyboards, right? Well, it certainly knows how to make a pricey board.

5 Using Cherry's own Red switches the MX Board 6.0 is possibly the most sturdy of all the keyboards I've tested this month. Possibly ever. Its aluminium housing, in brushed finish, means there is no movement to the frame at all when you type or when you're gaming. And it also means it's cold to the touch… mmm.

The magnetically attached rubber wrist-rest is a little prone to disconnection when you're moving the board around your desktop, but then because of its general heft that's not going happen often anyway. It is a very simple board, however. It has only the most rudimentary of controls – Win-key disable, integrated volume and keyboard brightness keys, and skip and play buttons. You also don't get any USB or audio passthrough.

The MX Board 6.0 is all about the basics, but that is where it excels. It's glorious to type on – I almost wish this review was longer – and in-game it's as responsive a board as you could hope for.

88%

STEELSERIES APEX M800

www.steelseries.com **£150**

→ If you don't like the deep travel distance of a mechanical switch keyboard, but hate the short lifespan of the membrane scissor switch, then SteelSeries' Apex M800 might just be the board for you.

6 You will need deep pockets, as the Apex M800 is a pricey device. But on the other hand SteelSeries has put in the work, creating a new kind of mechanical switch that almost feels like a scissor-switch. And it works. The travel is shorter, which means your fingers can work their way across this keyboard faster than on a normal mechanical-switch device. That is going to be of more interest to the pro *StarCraft II* players than the rest of us, however.

Feel is the important part for most keyboards, and personally I find the Apex's shorter travel incredibly responsive in game, but more prone to mis-strikes and a little dead in its reaction. But those issues are personal, and I also know gamers who have resisted mech-switches because they prefer a membrane scissor switch feel.

I can't close without saying that I find that massive spacebar utterly ludicrous – it's not as if it wasn't already the largest key on any keyboard. But the rest of the design is solid, classic, simple SteelSeries.

83%

STACKED UP

■ **PRICE (£)**

#		Product	Price
1		**Corsair Vengeance K70**	101
2		**G.Skill Ripjaws KM780 RGB**	130
3		**Razer Blackwidow Chroma**	125
4		**Asus STRIX Tactic Pro**	100
5		**Cherry MX Board 6.0**	132
6		**SteelSeries Apex M800**	150
7		**Roccat Ryos MK Pro**	120

ROCCAT RYOS MK PRO

www.roccat.com **£120**

→ Roccat's wide-boy keyboard was the first I tested of the burgeoning backlit-per-key crew. If you want your board to rock a sweeping flow of LED loveliness or password-breaching key-tracing, the Ryos is for you.

7

There's no getting away from it, the Ryos MK Pro is a seriously big keyboard that's going to take up a lot of your desk space. But it's also a fine example of German PC gaming engineering.

The Ryos can be bought with any of the four mechanical-switch Cherry MX options, and is an incredibly responsive board to back them up. It's also feature-packed, and that's not just the twin USB 2.0 ports and audio passthrough. The Easy-Shift [+] feature adds a secondary function, accessed via caps-lock, to every button on the board. There are also three extra buttons just below the spacebar which you can program using the powerful Roccat configuration software.

If you opt for a Roccat mouse, like the new Nyth, they'll even talk to each other, enabling you to use the Easy-Shift [+] button on the board to produce secondary functions for all the mouse buttons too. This is a seriously powerful gaming device, even if its expansive style might not be to everyone's taste.

88%

ESSENTIALS

#	Switches	Backlight	Macro keys	Rollover	Extras
1	Mechanical Cherry MX Red, Blue or Brown	Individual red or blue LED	None	Full N-key	Discrete media and lighting controls, Win-key, USB 2.0 socket
2	Mechanical Cherry MX Brown or Red	Individual multicoloured LED	6 (with three separate profiles)	Full N-key	Integrated media and lighting controls
3	Razer Green (Orange with the 'Stealth' version)	Individual multicoloured LED	5	10-key	Integrated media and lighting controls
4	Mechanical Cherry MX Red, Blue, Brown or Black	Individual orange LED	21	Full N-key	Discrete media and lighting controls, 3x thumb keys
5	Mechanical Cherry MX Red	Individual red LED	None	Full N-key	Integrated volume and lighting controls, discrete media play and skip buttons
6	SteelSeries QS1 mechanical switch	Individual multicoloured LED	6	256-key	Integrated media and lighting controls, 2x USB 2.0
7	Mechanical Cherry MX Red, Blue, Brown or Black	Individual blue LED	5	Full N-key	Integrated media and lighting controls, 3x thumb keys, 2x USB 2.0 socket, audio sockets

REVIEWS

The very best in gaming
hardware, reviewed

NVIDIA SHIELD

www.nvidia.com **£149**

→ Is Nvidia's new Shield box the ultimate way to get your gaming PC into the living room without having to physically lug the thing there? Or is it just a tablet without a screen?

This new Shield family member is the first to arrive without a display, tying it to your TV. It's an impressively powerful little box, packing graphics ability that would have been desktop-class a generation ago, and the best streaming tech to get games out of your spare room PC and onto your living room TV.

Having a wired connection makes streaming from a Nvidia-powered PC simple (although I still maintain the third-party Moonlight app delivers a more reliable experience, especially if you're running a powerline network at home). The upcoming Steam Link may be super cheap, but I doubt it

will be able to deliver the same streaming power, or such broad support for games, as this device.

Streaming isn't the only string to the Shield's bow, but unfortunately its Android TV OS comes as a mixed blessing. It's the set-top media box I'd recommend plugging into a 4K TV, with its HDCP 2.2 support for UHD Netflix and the like, but the MIA apps on Android TV are a huge source of frustration. That though will doubtless improve over time.

PROCESSOR: NVIDIA TEGRA X1 / **GRAPHICS:** 256 MAXWELL GPU CORES / **MEMORY:** 3GB / **STORAGE:** 16GB / **I/O:** 2X USB 3, 1X MICRO-USB 2.0, MICROSD SLOT, HDMI 2.0 / **NETWORKING:** GIGABIT ETHERNET, 802.11AC WIFI, BLUETOOTH 4.1

83%

ANDROID MEDIA BOX

1 INTO THE ETHER
The wired ethernet connection helps maintain a consistent stream over your home network.

2 PROTECTION
The use of HDMI 2.0 (with HDCP 2.2) means full 4K streaming at 60Hz for your Ultra HD Netflix needs.

3 CONNECTION
USB means you can plug pretty much any PC controller into the Shield, and there's Bluetooth too.

4 STORAGE
With the microSD slot you can upgrade storage for all Shield-optimised games, like *Portal*, and play locally.

AORUS X5

www.auros.com **£1,899**

→ Two for the price of one (beefy) GPU – that's the promise of the Aorus X5, with its SLI-paired Nvidia graphics cards. This 15-inch gaming notebook offers desktop-class performance in a slimline laptop.

GAMING LAPTOP

The problem with the push for ever thinner, ever more powerful gaming notebooks is that at least two things have to give. The first of those is battery life, for obvious reasons.

The second thing is thermal management. Those components create a whole lot of heat and, because of the limited cooling potential in an impressively svelte case like that of the Aorus X5, it leads to an awful lot of fan noise.

So while the gaming performance of the twin GPUs, RAIDed SSDs and high-end CPU is excellent, the battery life away from a power socket is pretty mediocre.

What definitely isn't mediocre, on the other hand, is that gorgeous super high-res IPS panel.

79%

SCREEN SIZE: 15.6" / **NATIVE RESOLUTION:** 2880 X 1620 / **GPU:** 2X NVIDIA GTX 965M SLI / **MEMORY:** 16GB DDR3 / **STORAGE:** 512GB SSD (RAID 0), 1TB HDD

ELEMENT XENON 700

www.elementgaming.com **£50**

→ There are definitely things I'm not 100% sold on with Element's Xenon 700, but the manufacturers also surprised me with just how capable their USB-enabled gaming headset is.

GAMING HEADSET

Because it's USB based, it bypasses whatever soundcard you're using in favour of its own built-in one, and there's an impressive clarity to this and to the 50mm drivers. Quite often I find gaming headsets have boosted bottom ends, making the explosions punchy but wiping out any other audio in-game or out. The Xenon is powerful enough to be great in gaming, but is also comfortable enough to wear for long periods without weighing you down, or becoming fatiguing on the ears with pounding bass. The fit is a little odd, requiring you to screw adjustments into place, and it still feels a little loose on the head.

As is the case with most £50 headsets, the Xenon 700 suffers in comparison with the daddy, the Kingston HyperX Pro.

82%

CONNECTION: WIRED USB / **DRIVERS:** 50MM / **FREQUENCY RANGE:** 20HZ - 20KHZ / **SURROUND:** VIRTUAL 7.1

ROUND-UP

MICRO CTRLR
Mad Catz **£28**

→ It's almost the ideal mobile gamepad. It's small, a decent price, the Bluetooth connectivity enables it to be wireless and it has impressive media and mouse-emulation. Sadly, like its bigger brother, it has issues matching the right buttons. *FIFA 16*, for example, is flipped frustratingly around.
www.madcatz.com

73%

OFFICE CHAIR
Element Gaming **£90**

→ If you're spending a long time sitting you want to make sure it's a comfortable seat. While I'm not entirely sure the red and black aesthetic necessarily makes this a 'gaming chair', it's simple to build and comfy. The finish isn't the highest quality, but for £90 it's a decent place to park.
www.elementgaming.com

77%

NYTH
Roccat **£90**

→ I'm not normally a fan of gaming mice with a million buttons, but the Nyth impressed. It's the easy configurability that pleases most. You can pull out the tiny buttons in favour of larger ones or mix and match – configuring via the powerful Swarm app. And the magnetic side grips switch from palm to claw grip in a trice. Quality stuff.
www.roccat.org

88%

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget

ADVANCED

MID-RANGE

BUDGET

KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank

TOTAL £744

MOTHERBOARD

H81M-P33
MSI **£34**

A bargain-priced microATX board that pairs nicely with the Pentium G3258, letting you overclock into 4GHz+ territory.

PROCESSOR
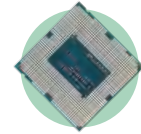
Pentium Anniversary G3258
Intel **£48**

Ludicrously cheap and overclockable, the dual-core G3258 rivals far more expensive processors in gaming performance.

GRAPHICS CARD

AMD R9 380 2GB
Sapphire **£159**

AMD's R9 380 is a refreshed R9 285, but it still packs enough power to handle 1080p gaming at a decent price.

COOLER

Hyper 212 EVO
Cooler Master **£25**

A legendary cooler, still the best for its very reasonable price. Overclock to your heart's content with this.

MEMORY
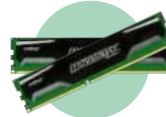
Crucial Ballistix Sport 1600MHz (8GB)
Crucial **£40**

Cheap, low-profile, and reliable. Does its job. The best 8GB you'll find.

POWER SUPPLY

EVGA 500W 80PLUS Certified ATX12V/EPS12V
EVGA **£33**

A reliable PSU with enough juice to run your CPU and a reasonably power-hungry GPU.

SSD

BX100 250GB
Crucial **£67**

Thinking about skimping and going HDD-only? Don't. The BX100 is much faster and a fantastic performer for the price.

CASE

Carbide 200R
Corsair **£50**

The 200R gets the job done with toolless trays and plenty of space. ATX-sized, so you can upgrade that microATX board later.

DISPLAY

VX2263SMHL
Viewsonic **£118**

An affordable 1080p monitor with vibrant IPS image quality and low response times. A real bargain.

KEYBOARD

CM Storm QuickFire Rapid
Coolermaster **£83**

A no-frills mechanical keyboard with a standard layout and Cherry switches. We recommend Browns or Reds for gaming.

MOUSE

G303 Daedalus Apex
Logitech **£50**

The best gaming mouse sensor in existence paired with buttons with extremely low click distance. Especially ideal for MOBA players.

HEADSET

HyperX Cloud
Kingston **£50**

Our favourite gaming headset, and it happens to be as cheap as plenty of inferior cans. A good buy for any gaming rig.

JOYSTICK

Xbox 360 Wired Controller
Microsoft **£21**

Now available at a sane price, the standard 360 controller feels great and functions perfectly on PC.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games

TOTAL
£1384

MOTHERBOARD

Z170 Pro Gaming
Asus **£120**

The latest revision of our favourite gaming motherboard, with an M.2 PCIe x4 slot, Intel network port, USB 3.1 and SLI support.

PROCESSOR
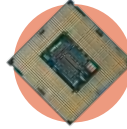
i5-6600K
Intel **£156**

Intel's new Skylake processor is nearly as fast as an i7 for gaming. Comes with some important memory/storage speed boosts.

GRAPHICS CARD

GTX 970 4G
MSI **£270**

Offers the best price/performance ratio right now, and MSI's model is cheap and overclockable, with a quiet cooler.

COOLER

Hyper 212 EVO
Cooler Master **£25**

If it ain't broke… the Hyper 212 EVO is a great cooler for the price. Save a bit of money in your mid-range build.

MEMORY

Ballistix Sport(8GB)
Crucial **£90**

8GB of reasonably fast DDR4, and one of the cheapest deals you'll find. Corsair is reliable, and the RAM's overclockable to boot.

POWER SUPPLY

CX600M
Corsair **£61**

80Plus Bronze efficient, with enough power for a good gaming PC. Modular design is a great perk that cuts down on cable tangles.

SSD

850 EVO 250GB
Samsung **£75**

Samsung retains its top spot on the SSD pile with the fantastically priced, very speedy 850 EVO. Still the best price/performance.

CASE

S340
NZXT **£57**

The stylish S340 has some nice touches, such as removable dust filters and space for huge liquid cooling radiators.

DISPLAY

G257HU
Acer **£282**

A step up from 1080p to 1440p territory, with a vibrant IPS display and good response times at a strong price.

KEYBOARD

K70 Vengeance
Corsair **£101**

A great, full-size mechanical keyboard with an ergonomic wrist rest. We recommend Cherry Brown or Red switches for gaming.

MOUSE

Deathadder 2013
Razer **£59**

There's not a huge range of price differences on the best mice, so stick with the best for your mid-range build too.

HEADSET

HyperX Cloud
Kingston **£50**

Even for our medium build, we still recommend this decently-priced headset. There's nothing better for the money.

JOYSTICK

Dualshock 4
Sony **£38**

Requires unofficial software tools to get working, but it's so comfortable to hold and comes with lovely face buttons.

MOTHERBOARD

ROG Maximus VIII Hero
Asus **£172**

Fantastic overclocking and stability, with a great UEFI BIOS from Asus. M.2, USB 3.1 and on-board power, reset, CMOS, etc, buttons.

PROCESSOR
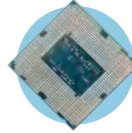
Core i7-6700K
Intel **£263**

Intel's new top-of-the-line Skylake processor. Its new chipset includes important memory/storage speed boosts.

GRAPHICS CARD

GTX 980 Gaming 4G
MSI **£415**

Right now the GTX 980 is the best value single-GPU card for ultra 1080p and 1440p gaming, bar none.

COOLER

H90
Corsair **£75**

Quiet even under heavy load, the H90 gets the cooling job done with a single 140mm radiator, easily fitting a variety of cases.

MEMORY

Ripjaws V Series DDR4 2666 16GB
G.SKILL **£116**

16GB of fast DDR4. RAM speeds make only a small difference, but the 2666 starting speed is stable and widely compatible.

POWER SUPPLY

Supernova 850W G2 80 Plus Gold
EVGA **£112**

A reliable, quiet, gold-rated EVGA power supply, modular, with enough juice to sustain two overclocked graphics cards and a CPU.

SSD

850 EVO 500GB
Samsung **£133**

The 850 EVO is so good, there's not much need to step up to the more expensive 850 Pro for a gaming rig. Just get a bigger drive.

CASE

Enthoo EVOLV ATX
Phanteks **£140**

This beautiful aluminium case is a step up in price, but is certainly an impressive chassis for the advanced gaming PC.

DISPLAY

Predator XB270HUbprz 144Hz G-Sync
Acer **£600**

Simply the best: a 27" 1440p 144Hz IPS display, with Nvidia's variable refresh tech.

KEYBOARD

Ducky One
Ducky **£100**

An elegant set of keys from mechanical keyboard fan favourite Ducky. Renowned for their impeccable feel and build quality.

MOUSE

Deathadder 2013
Razer **£59**

Even if you've got money to burn, the Deathadder really is the best mouse you can buy right now.

HEADSET

H Wireless
SteelSeries **£249**

Our favourite wireless gaming headset, with great sound quality and a convenient battery swapping system for long gaming sessions.

JOYSTICK

Dualshock 4
Sony **£38**

For the high-end rig, we recommend the PS4 controller as well – £38 is about as much as you need to spend.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

TOTAL
£2472

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

I have no idea what any of these things are.

"I don't know the difference between an AUG A3 and a CZ-805"

Failing to parse the meta of **BATTLEFIELD 4**

Battlefield 4's launch was a fascinating mess. It's not just that it was unplayable, it was downright surreal. The day it released, the PC Gamer team loaded onto a server and experienced a round of Obliteration unbound from the laws of space and time. There were invisible players, teleporting opponents, and the server-wide recreation of a scratched DVD. When your shooter resembles a high concept Doctor Who episode, things have gone badly wrong.

I didn't play much after that – first deciding to wait until it worked, and then simply losing interest. But I do ostensibly like the series, and, more importantly, I bought all of the DLC in a sale. I figured I owed it to myself, and my wallet, to give it another shot.

The first thing I noticed was that I wasn't having fun. The people who are still playing *BF4* are very good it. I am

PHIL SAVAGE

THIS MONTH
Stared at a page full of guns and didn't care.

ALSO PLAYED
Metal Gear Solid V, Invisible Inc

not. I'm using the starter assault rifle, while being repeatedly killed by guns with more impressive sounding names. There's a lot of XP grinding ahead of me.

I'm helped by the discovery of 'noob friendly' servers. Initially I'm suspicious. A beginner server is exactly the sort of place a *Battlefield* pro would go – hunting down the downtrodden and the lame for sport, just like all posh people secretly want to do. Thankfully, *Battlefield 4*'s server options let admins utilise a series of restrictions. Players with a kill/death ratio of 1.05 or above are barred entry. For new players, this is

a land of opportunity. A place for the tired, the poor, the mediocre masses.

Suddenly, I am able to kill people. I feel this is a significant step forward. But am I having fun yet? No, I don't think I am. The part of my brain that recognises achievement is gratified when all the XP bars go up, but that's not the same as enjoying myself. My problem is with the unlock screen. It's overwhelming. My biggest obstacle to meaningful success is not knowing which guns are good. Maybe this is a deficiency in my own ability to operate as a human being, but I don't know the difference between an AUG A3 and a CZ-805. One has 20% less aim-down-

HOW CAN I KNOW IF THE AN-94 IS THE GUN FOR ME, UNLESS I'VE TESTED IT WITH A STUBBY GRIP?

Look out, he's pointing his bang-stick!

KILLED BY
tvinvint

OK, now I'm wearing a monocle?

How can a game about cars playing football be so good?

"I feel bad enough, mate. Give me a break"

Getting a little too excited in **ROCKET LEAGUE**

▶ **ANDY KELLY**

THIS MONTH
Shouted at complete strangers on the internet.

ALSO PLAYED
*80 Days,
The Beginner's Guide*

I don't play many competitive games, but when I do, I go *deep*. My current obsession is *Rocket League*, and I hate what I've become. I'm a quiet gamer usually. I don't swear or yell when things aren't going my way. But when I play carball, I'm constantly shrieking, cursing, punching the air, and generally acting like a lager-soaked lout on the terraces. I get *furious* at my teammates when they mess up. Because of course it's *their* fault. I used to groan when people played *PES* or *FIFA* in the office and yelled like maniacs, but now I get it.

What I love about *Rocket League* is how short the time between loading it up and having fun is. You're into the menus in seconds, and moments later the match countdown starts to tick. It's an incredibly slick game, and it respects your time in a way so many other games don't. Even the developer logos at the start are skippable. I mainly play RPGs and big open-world games, so it's extra refreshing to have something so instantly entertaining.

ROCKET AND ROLL

It comes in waves, though. Sometimes, usually when I'm winning, it's the greatest game ever made. But then I'll fire it up on my lunch break and have two shit games, and suddenly I lose interest. It's a relationship of peaks and troughs, but the peaks are so high that I always come crawling back. The way the ball explodes when you score, spinning nearby players into the air. Satisfying doesn't begin to describe it.

There are things that are starting to annoy me. People who spam "Nice shot!" when you score an own goal. I feel bad enough about it, mate. Give me a break. People who rage-quit when their team is losing. Matches are five bloody minutes long. Can't you just wait it out? You get 750 XP for finishing a match, damn it! I'm not sure how long my love affair with *Rocket League* will last, but it's a hell of a fling. ■

sights base spread, but I'm not sure what that means or why I should care.

Worse, unlocking a gun isn't enough – I then have to earn its attachments. How can I know if the AN-94 is the gun for me, unless I've tested it with a PSO-1 sight and stubby grip? I don't have the knowledge to even conceive of an effective build, let alone work towards unlocking it. I'm left floundering with sub-par setups, and forced to score opportunistic kills against equally confused players.

WAR DAIRY

A criticism often made of *Team Fortress 2* is that the new weapons have left it impossible to follow. For instance, a Scout can now throw a bottle of milk at you. It's strange and upsetting to be coated in milk, but all it takes is a moment to learn that, while drenched, a percentage of damage taken is returned to the attacker as health. It's a clear and distinct status effect, conveyed in a clear and direct way. It's milk. It's recognisably different from a shotgun.

None of *Battlefield*'s weapons feel distinct. Deciphering them feels like having a mechanic dryly explain to me the ways in which each model of Ford Focus is slightly different. It feels less about war, and more about statistics. If a shooter is best learned via a spreadsheet, it's not for me. ■

I always do this when balls fly at my face.

Of course players can be 12ft tall. Shut up.
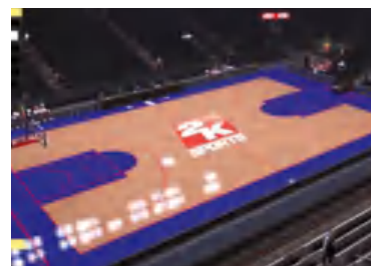
"Garbage Man, as I've called him, is to be my surrogate"

Taking customisation too far in NBA 2K16

In games, and hopefully someday in life, creating outrageous freaks is my thing. For *NBA 2K16* I once again take it too far by ballooning brows and squashing noses until my avatar looks like a Cro Magnon man in Nikes. The result might not be as immediately appalling as my *WWE 2K16* monstrosity who had Canadian flag nipple pasties and arrows pointing crotchward, but this is basketball we're talking about here. It is a respected sport, and if you need convincing of that, please see the screenshot above.

Garbage Man, as I've called him, is to be my ugly surrogate (surruglygate? No) in *NBA 2K16*'s new MyCareer mode, a cutscene-stuffed campaign hijacked by American film director Spike Lee who insists on calling it his 'joint'. It begins with you shooting hoops on a Harlem street court and sharing U-rated banter with your sister as close-ups reveal a gurning player who will not only break ankles, but hearts too.

Well, the hearts of college recruiters anyway. After some high school games for the Midtown Bulldogs – which my bearded 7ft 4 teenager predictably dominates as his bros cheer from the bleachers (at least, that's what I assume "Get dem hunneds out for your boy"

▶ **BEN GRIFFIN**

THIS MONTH
Shouldn't have watched Space Jam just before playing this.

ALSO PLAYED
Metal Gear Solid V

means), we cut to my house as a procession of suited men try to woo me. They come with stats and promises, but sadly no chocolates. I go with Georgetown as the scout they send has the kindest face, and my basketball career begins.

LIKE CLOCKWORK

It turns out there's more to this game than squeaking around a shiny floor. I have to juggle relationships, sign endorsements, and most stressfully, go shopping for expensive watches. Have you ever had to buy an expensive watch? It's like choosing your favourite pasta shape. I instead spend my first wage on a $750 baseball cap.

I GO WITH GEORGETOWN, AS THE SCOUT THEY SEND HAS THE KINDEST FACE

Between games Garbage Man has screaming feuds with jealous friends and loud meetings with slimey agents. After the team owner muses to me that "Our lives are like a pearl necklace of great moments, strung together with the finest silk thread of memories," I lose faith in Jones' overwritten joint and abandon my career to indulge my creative compulsion with the game's various customisations.

First I delve into the jersey maker and slap a big frowny face on the front, but I feel this glumness clashes with my player's happy-go-lucky brand. I try the court creator next, and whip up a belter: a picture of a basketballing Benjamin Franklin on centre circle, the word 'FEAR' written under the basket in block capitals, and speakers set to blare out an evil laugh every time someone shoots wide in a hilarious effect that definitely won't get annoying.

To cement my court's status as the NBA's most unnerving venue, there's something of The Shining about its honeycomb wood flooring dyed blood red at one end. Red rum!

I started my *NBA 2K16* journey with the noble intention of creating the ultimate freak, and I end with an arguably greater purpose: manically customising everything. Now I'm off to ramp up hot dog prices, bye! ■

"It would've been far easier just to play the game in the first place"

Finally playing THIRTY FLIGHTS OF LOVING after two years of pretending to do so

What kind of idiot would lie about playing *Thirty Flights of Loving* just so they can avoid being told, "oh man, what the hell are you doing, get that played!"?

Hi, I'm Samuel Roberts, editor of PC Gamer, and I've been fraudulently telling people I've played Blendo Games' heist story for about two years now. I developed a whole patter on what I'd say when people asked me about it, too. "Oh yeah, less story is better, what a masterwork! Interactive narrative at its best!" This is not normal behaviour, but by the time I told a couple of people I'd played *Thirty Flights*, I'd become properly invested in the fiction of the lie.

It turns out it would've been far easier just to play the game in the first place: it is 13 minutes long. One Sunday recently, I sat down and did just that.

I remember reading a piece on *Thirty Flights of Loving* by my predecessor, Graham, a few years ago. He said that *Thirty Flights* tells a better story in 13 minutes than a game typically does in 13 hours, and praised its use of cinematic techniques to enhance the story, calling it the sort of game Edgar Wright might make. In case you're not familiar with it, *Thirty Flights* is about a heist that goes wrong, using smash cuts and flashbacks to explore

SAMUEL ROBERTS

THIS MONTH
Had both a relationship and a heist go wrong in 13 minutes.

ALSO PLAYED
Transformers Devastation, GTA V

the characters, their relationships and the build-up to the disaster.

CHOICE CUTS
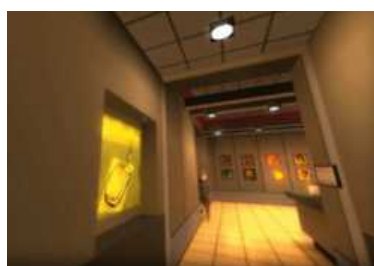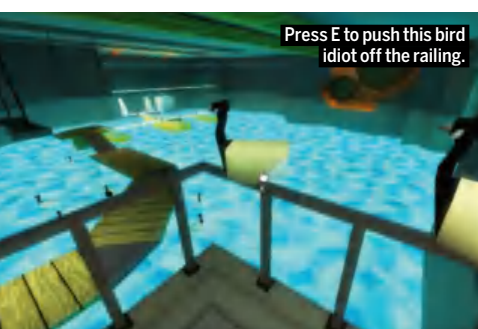
It's a very effective way of presenting quite a simple story. I wonder if there's anything a 13-hour game can learn from it. Some environments in *Thirty Flights of Loving*, which I guess could've taken weeks for Blendo mastermind Brendon Chung to make, appear for no longer than a few seconds. It's hard to envision a game by a bigger developer using a technique like this, because the cost of building detailed environments that only linger on-screen for a moment is probably too cost prohibitive to be worth it. There's a sequence in Hot Fuzz

I'VE BEEN TELLING PEOPLE I'VE PLAYED BLENDO GAMES' HEIST STORY FOR ABOUT TWO YEARS NOW

I'm obsessed with, where sergeant Nicholas Angel leaves London and heads for the fictional West Country village of Sandford by train. It perfectly captures the mundane experience of public transport in the UK, but it also beautifully conveys the passage of time and feeling of stepping from one place to another. *Thirty Flights* cuts from place to place in a similar fashion, leaving your imagination to fill the gaps.

It's a rare example of experimental narrative technique in a game, and three years after its release, to my memory only *The Stanley Parable* and *Beginner's Guide* have used cuts to a similarly energising effect. What if the next *Wolfenstein* instantly cut from place to place to show how the world had changed in the years since *The New Order*? What if *Fallout 4* ended with a quick montage of all your major decisions in the game that had led to that point? Imagine if the next *GTA* took character-swapping a step further and occasionally cut to a gunfight in another part of the world.

Thirty Flights of Loving has made me want to see more experimentation in the way stories are told in games. Now that I no longer have to pretend I've played it, I shall ramble about that the next time someone asks me what I think of the game. ∎

Press E to push this bird idiot off the railing.

Finally, I can stop pretending I know what this is.

The time portal's in a lakehouse, a cute reference to the Sandra Bullock film.

1 THE FORGOTTEN CITY

MOD A whodunnit in a hidden city from the past

The Elder Scrolls **has some of the richest, weirdest lore in games, and the Dwemer are a big part of that. The steampunky dwarves have been gone from the world of Tamriel for quite some time, leaving behind only a lot of dungeons full of mechanical spiders, golems and horrible traps. Yeah, thanks for that.**

Some of the best parts of *Morrowind* involved spelunking into these strange tombs in search of treasure, and the ambitious *Forgotten City* evokes that feeling. This sizeable mod adds a cavernous town and an original soundtrack, in a supernatural murder mystery that takes you back in time.

Now, Tamriel in the past is a lot like Tamriel in the present, and so the secretive town you find yourself in isn't too dissimilar to ones found in Skyrim proper. The major differences are that this one is located underground, and that it's about to be destroyed by an ancient Dwemer curse. You have a vested interest in that not happening, so it's up to muggins – again – to interrogate the locals and rifle through their underwear drawers, in an effort to untangle the mystery.

The Forgotten City is a slick, well-presented mod that has clearly taken quite some time to put together. There's a mass of voice acting, which might stand out as slightly amateur in another game but feels oddly superior in *Skyrim*, while the mystery itself is actually pretty intriguing. Don't forget to give this massive mod a try.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/ForgottenCity

2 GALCIV 3 SPACESHIPS

SHIPS That time Han Solo waged war on the galaxy

The *Galactic Civilizations* series is ideal for generating space anecdotes, as you'll know if you've read Tom Francis' thrilling war diaries. *GalCiv 3* doesn't reinvent the wheel, but it does have Steam Workshop support. Stick this lot in your game, and tell some stories.

MILLENNIUM FALCON
Before Han, Chewie and the gang bring the real thing out of retirement, there's still time to plunge the Millennium Falcon into your own galactic brouhaha with the aid of this intricate 3D model.

www.bit.ly/GalCiv1

DS9
Exploration is all well and good, but your civilisation needs a place to rest during its mission through the stars. How about setting up Deep Space 9 as a starbase? All that's missing are the Ferengi.

www.bit.ly/GalCiv9

SOVEREIGN
The ancient Reaper ship Sovereign caused a bit of trouble in *Mass Effect*, so it's the perfect thing to inflict terror on an unsuspecting galaxy. Shepard's Normandy is also available.

www.bit.ly/GalCiv3

3 SOMA MODDING TOOLS

UTILITY Make your own existential horror adventure

These tools let you crack open a tightly controlled world.

We're in a weird position with game development in this day and age, in that it's frequently easier to make your own games than to mod existing ones. They've just got too complicated. It's almost like game development is difficult, or something. True to this principle, the modding tools for Frictional Games' *Soma* are pretty bogglingly complex, at least to the unversed individual (hello!)

But in return for a bit of effort, you get access to *Soma*'s unsettling underwater world, its sophisticated physics system, its assets, its engine and so on. As with their previous games – the *Penumbra* series and *Amnesia* – Frictional's latest fright-'em-up has an extensive set of tools that should enable pretty much any modification you can imagine. (Although something set in an aquatic facility might be easiest.) While the main tools are included with the purchase of *Soma*, the following link collects absolutely everything else you'll need, while providing detailed documentation on how to make stuff with the editors. There's some great insight into Frictional's level design philosophy too.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/SomaTools

4 HITMAN: BLOCK MONEY

WEBGAME A puzzling demake of *Hitman: Blood Money*

As is often the case with PuzzleScript games, I'm completely and utterly stuck. It's *Hitman: Blood Money*, see – look, there's Agent 47's iconic slaphead and exquisite tailored suit. It's *Hitman: Blood Money* demade into a turn-based, 2D puzzle game. You're trying to assassinate some folks, then escape without being shot.

There's stealth, there's a disguise system, and thankfully there's an undo button after you're instantly shot dead by security for the umpteenth time. You'll get stuck on level 2, so know that you can knock out enemies by bumping into them, and consequently press X to swap your clothes for theirs.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/BlockMoney
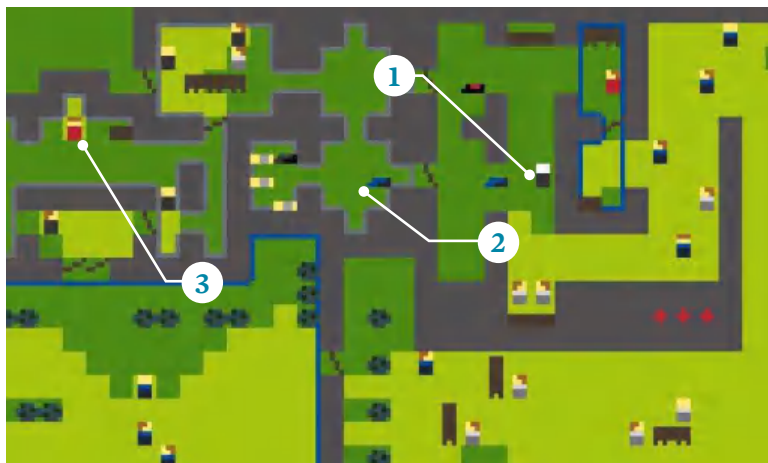
1 AGENT 47
Here you are, wearing a bodyguard disguise. Ready your gun with X, then shoot by pointing towards a person.

2 BODY SHOP
Shooting tends to create bodies, which you'll need to hide out of sight of NPCs (their sight lines are highlighted).

3 RED DEAD
Targets are marked in red, and they're often flanked by bodyguards or civilians. Don't let that get in your way.
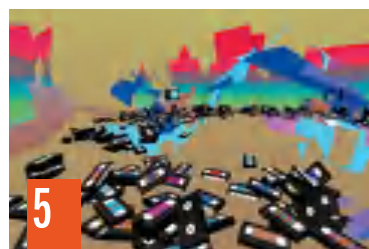
5 MYSTERY TAPES

FREEWARE VHS fetishism, weird imagery, a dude

Strangethink makes games that are less like games and more like bizarre, often undecipherable little oddities – and I wouldn't have it any other way. The latest, *Mystery Tapes*, deposits you in an empty void with hundreds of discarded VHS tapes, like Blockbuster Video the day after it went into administration.

You summon a backdrop by selecting three videotape cassettes and inserting them into the VHS players provided, an action that makes the environment dance and sing around you, and a Bowie-esque stranger spout gibberish from the corner. It's more of a tool than a game, this, but it's a fascinating thing to play around with.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/MysteryTapes

6 AUTUMN LEAVES

MOD At last, time to read everything on your backlog


Just be sure not to break your reading glasses.

Some 200 years after the apocalypse, literature in games tends to be sorted into two categories: completely burnt books, and technical manuals in perfect condition, which somehow increase your skills when read. *Autumn Leaves* imagines a third option.

It takes place in a *Fallout: New Vegas* vault that houses the world's largest collection of books. Before the bombs fell, a group of intellectuals gathered to save as much of the world's knowledge as possible. The bombs fell a little sooner than expected, and only one of them made it to the shelter. As lonely humans tend to, he made himself a family of robots, who greet you shortly after your arrival.

This is an extraordinarily well-produced mod, boasting its own intro sequence and multiple endings, along with some new voice actors. These fit pretty well with Obsidian's talky take on *Fallout,* and a good deal of *Autumn Leaves* takes place in conversation – often very philosophical conversation. Luckily, the story is interesting, funny, detailed and above all long. The creator describes *Autumn Leaves* as "DLC-sized", and that's not far off.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/FalloutAutumn

7
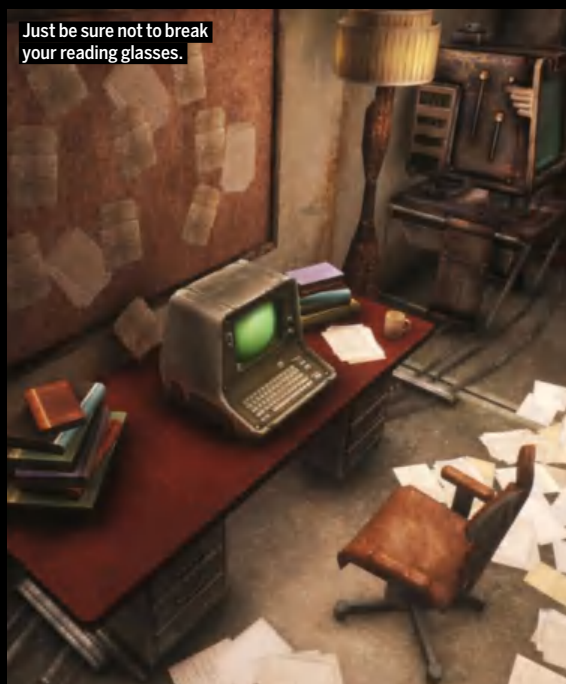
BETWEEN US

### DEMO Taxi confessions in a novel adventure teaser

Between Us is a conversational adventure game that deposits you in the back seat of a taxi, with a cabbie up front who seems genuinely interested in everything you have to say. (Yes, I know. You'll just have to suspend your disbelief at this point.)

This demo 'trailer' offers just a taste of the story, but it's intriguing stuff, featuring a woman who was present during some earth-shattering event, and who's currently delaying her taxi ride to the airport.

The presentation is exquisite – all mood lighting and cinematic camera angles – made with tactile, low-poly assets that look like origami. I can't wait to see what roads this journey takes us down.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/BetweenUsGame

They look a bit gridlike, but curves are coming.
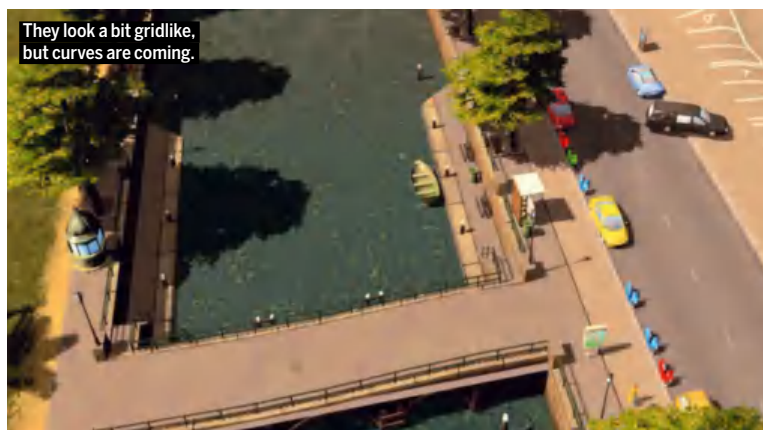
8 CITIES: SKYLINES CANALS

MOD Water way to have a good time [*Fired* – Ed]

Have you noticed that the value of property tends to increase when it happens to have been built next to a body of water? Thanks to the *After Dark* expansion, that now happens in *Cities: Skylines* too. But if you don't fancy convincing a river to run through your gleaming metropolis, or moving the entire city closer to the sea, you can now introduce elegant, European-style canals courtesy of this mod. So much more refined.

Unlike real canals, which are maintained by a steady infusion of swan shit and discarded kebabs, you need to pay people to look after these. You'll also need to power a few lights so that people don't stumble into your canal half-cut. It's a nominal cost, however, and worth it for the variety and beauty they'll bring to your town. Among other things, creator GCVos plans to add a fancy Parisian-style lock down the line.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/CanalBlocks
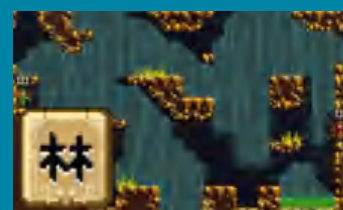
HIGH RISERS
Raise your game with these towering achievements
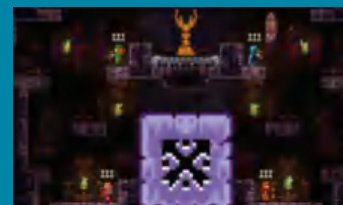
1 DESECRATED GROUND
TowerFall developer Matt Thorson, no less, made this map. It uses the recently added Chalice platforms, which kill every other player if you stand on one long enough.

www.bit.ly/TowerFall1

2 SAMURAI FOREST
If this level looks familiar, that's because it's from *Samurai Gunn*, a local multiplayer game that's been a tad overshadowed by *TowerFall*. Check it out, if this map appeals.

www.bit.ly/TowerFall2

3 TEMPLE OF THE SUN
One of five temple-themed maps from creator Kabu – the others are themed around water, wind, nature and darkness. This one was built to honour the sun.

www.bit.ly/TowerFall3

9 TOWERFALL LEVELS

MAPS Is the new level editor a towering achievement?

Designing a great multiplayer level for any game takes a lot of work. You'll need to iterate and test, test and iterate, making sure that not a single pixel is wasted. Having a level editor also helps a lot.

It's probably just as well, then, that *TowerFall*, the multiplayer game of firing arrows at your friends and shouting a lot, has received one recently. You'll need the *Dark World* expansion to download it, but once you have that it's yours, and you should find it simple to use – the small, boxy scale of *TowerFall*'s levels has something to do with that. Steam Workshop already plays host to lots of nicely designed stages, including the selection I've compiled for you over on the right.

Each level comes with its own set of rules, and even its own background, tileset and music if you fancy getting really creative. Here are three of the best towers on the *TowerFall* Workshop: good places in which to arrow your friends to death.

DOWNLOAD AT www.towerfall-game.com

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10 YUME NIKKI 3D

FREEWARE To sleep, perchance to dream something normal

Yume Nikki remains a phenomenon. It's a simple 2D horror game about a girl and her nightmares, but it manages to be more unsettling than pretty much any big-budget horror game you care to name. It's a game with no text and no story, giving you room to draw your own conclusions and project your own fears onto her nocturnal adventures.

Yume Nikki 3D is an accomplished fan game that adds an extra dimension, and another strange dreamworld full of bizarre imagery. While some fan games offer weirdness for weirdness' sake, Zykov Eddy's dreamscape is consistent, despite, yes, being very strange. This download includes the equally odd *Isolated* DLC.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/Yume3D

DOTA 2 REBORN

The tough first few months of a difficult labour. *By Chris Thursten*

The theory goes that free-to-play games live or die on the strength and regularity of their updates. The vast majority rely on new characters, maps, and balance changes to draw players back and to get them to open their wallets again. *Dota 2* remains the obstinate exception to this rule, a vastly popular and profitable free-to-play game that seems to need absolutely nothing from its players, and therefore is able, most of the time, to ignore the demand for new stuff as it is traditionally provided.

Late last year Valve broke its silence to announce that *Dota 2* would receive no further seasonal events, and far fewer chunky major updates, until a game-wide engine revamp had taken place. That revamp was subsequently called *Dota 2 Reborn*, an update so substantial it involved redeveloping the entire game on the Source 2 engine. This would, Valve promised, future-proof the game and make it easier to maintain.

In some senses, *Reborn* has done exactly that: it has changed the nature of *Dota 2* as a game and promises a very different future for it than the one players might have imagined this time last year. On the other hand, it has driven the game back a step, forced *Dota 2* into a troubled second beta, rife with problems and missing features.

Let's start with the good. *Reborn's* flagship feature is its custom games and the set of powerful tools with which to create them. Anybody can create and upload new multiplayer games, and a wide and impressive variety already exists. You can race through an obstacle course in the

*Mario Kart*esque *Dota Run*. You can play *Pudge Wars*, a *Warcraft III* classic that involves throwing hooks to fish for enemy players across an impassable river. You can go on a adventure with your friends in *Roshpit Champions: Survival,* a game that is part *Left 4 Dead,* part *Diablo*.

Unlike the modding communities of the past, it's very easy to find and share these *Dota 2* custom games. Finding a match for a popular mode is no harder than joining a regular game, and downloads take seconds. The quality and stability varies, but that goes with the territory.

REBROKEN

Less forgivable is the general instability introduced by *Reborn* itself. The update left beta in September, but this was far too early by almost anybody's estimation. In the months that followed, problems ranged from instability, trouble connecting from various parts of the world, and – in the worst cases – game-breaking balance problems. Bad memories linger of games lost to the mouse lag bug, or the error that allowed the Dire side's ancient creeps – the most lucrative source of neutral gold in the game – to duplicate themselves automatically, forever.

The worst of these problems are now resolved, but edge cases are being discovered all the time. Given that *Dota 2* is a game with millions of moving parts, it's likely we'll be digging up problems for a while yet. I managed to fix the last of my issues by uninstalling and reinstalling, but friends continue to report crashes that didn't occur under old *Dota*.

I am also gradually warming to the new UI. The new inventory system is worse for collectors and traders but better, I find, for regular players – it's easier to see all of the cosmetics you have for a given character at a glance, and being able to set custom 'shuffle' lists for things like loading screens and announcer packs adds a degree of control that wasn't there before. I even like the silly new chest-opening screen,

which shows you all of the potential rewards, sets them spinning, and then removes them one by one until you're left with your reward.
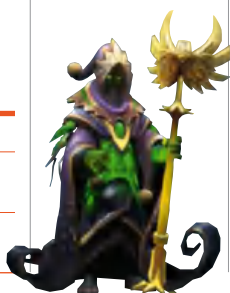
The old battle point levelling system is gone, which is good because it was meaningless. Its replacement is a new XP-based levelling system, which is also meaningless. Stranger still is Valve's revamp of *Dota 2*'s social features. They've removed anything they felt wasn't being used enough, which means guilds are gone – to an ironic outcry from the small percentage of highly-engaged people who were using them to organise communities, including me. New regional chat channels encourage you to connect with hot *Dota 2* solo players in your area. This is an absolutely terrible

> ## THE OLD BATTLE POINT LEVELLING SYSTEM IS GONE, WHICH IS GOOD AS IT WAS MEANINGLESS

idea, as almost anybody could tell you: 'hot' in this case means 'very likely to flame you' and 'in your area' means 'a shocking reminder that you are, at any given time, no more than a mile from scores of racist children'.

This might sound strange after an overhaul of this magnitude, but it really feels like *Dota 2* needs an update: an old-school, new-stuff-to-get-excited about update. Heroes are the lifeblood of this game, and *Dota 2* gained ten in 2013, five last year, and only one in 2015. Its more traditionally profit-hungry rivals – *League of Legends, Smite, Heroes of the Storm* – expand their rosters every month, in some cases every couple of weeks. As much as I love this game and laud Valve's willingness to do things differently (particularly when it comes to offering the game for free) I suspect that a proper update is needed to get the community back on side. ■

Roshpit Champions is an impressive RPG mod.

You can now preview the contents of treasure chests.

CHAT ROULETTE
Fingers on the mute button

FLAME INDEX
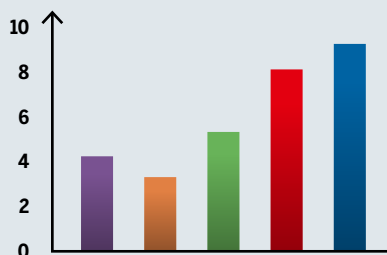
- ■ *WoW* regional chat
- ■ Average *TF2* lobby
- ■ *Heroes of the Storm* ranked match
- ■ *Dota 2* region chat
- ■ *League of Legends* ranked match

Desert terrain! Finally, *Dota* screenshots aren't all green!

A few minutes into the game you'll see this.

Not a welcome sight at the door.

You're trapped in this room with this thing.

PENUMBRA: BLACK PLAGUE

Creeping through corridors of uncertainty. *By Jon Morcom*

Penumbra: Black Plague **opens bravely by virtually spelling out its eventual outcome. Your character, Philip LaFresque, frantically types an email to a friend, imploring him to finish a job that despite his best efforts he could not. The player knows from the outset that this game won't necessarily end in heady triumph. But in order to see how things have got to this desperate point, we'll need a flashback; cue the harp swirls and wavy lines.**

The game starts in earnest as you regain consciousness in a dingy locked room in a scientific facility in the freezing wastes of Greenland, having been knocked-out by an unknown entity at the end of

Penumbra: Overture. Philip has previously been summoned to the facility by his father, chief translator for a scientific body called The Archaic, who have ill-advisedly disturbed the subterranean resting place of an ancient spiritual body called the Tuurngait. In retaliation, the Tuurngait have set loose a virus which has either killed, or possessed and transformed all the scientists at the station. These zombified things roam the facility, convincingly selling the notion that perhaps it's better to let sleeping gods lie.

Black Plague consolidated the solid template for the *Amnesia* games that followed, with the accent on exploration, enviro-puzzling and as far as possible the steadfast avoidance of any contact with the bads of the piece. Once you've worked out how to escape from that first locked room,

armed with just a flashlight that consumes batteries at an alarming rate, your time is spent solving problems and assimilating the scraps of story revealed through notes and computer files that you find scattered throughout the facility.

PALPABLE HORROR
When I first played, I was taken with Frictional's proprietary HPL game engine and its largely QTE- and animation-free way of handling object interaction. Wherever you can pick up or manipulate something, the reticule turns into a small hand icon, which can grab items and use them in the environment. Need to jemmy open a gate? Pick up that length of steel and waggle it back and forth near the lock. Looking for batteries in a desk? Open each draw in turn by dragging it out with your floating hand. This is little more than a well-disguised gravity gun but it

▶ **NEED TO KNOW**

RELEASED
2008

DEVELOPER
Frictional Games

PUBLISHER
Paradox Interactive

LINK
www.penumbragame.com

Not quite the father-son reunion Philip had hoped for.
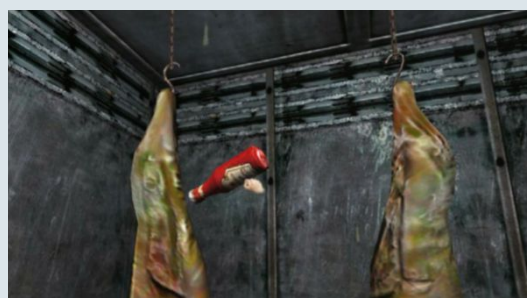
GET A GRIP

Some everyday applications for Penumbra's *grabby hand*

Drinking milk straight from the bottle.

Robbing vending machines.

Pouring tomato ketchup onto a side of pork.

Fly-tipping disgustingly stained mattresses.

Delivering discretely packaged pornography to lonely men.

---

significantly enhances the sense of player agency and control.

If I were to include some additional keyboard commands for this game, I'd maybe include H to auto-hide, B to bolt (like Usain) and Ctrl to withhold an involuntary bowel movement. Actually, although *Black Plague* is frequently unnerving, the Infected themselves aren't that scary, resembling as they do sinewy gingerbread men – apart from their odd penis/umbilicus arrangement, of course. But what they lack in visual menace is compensated for by the highly effective audio, or when you see the telltale flash of their torch beam at the end of a corridor. If this was an RPG, you'd put all your skill points into Cower.

INNER DEMON

You're isolated throughout this relatively short game, even though you do eventually make contact with another scientist who enlists your help. However, it's evident early on that Philip has himself been infected by the virus. This manifests in some trippy sequences and the hijacking of Philip's mind by a Tuurngait spirit named Clarence. With his

unrelenting sarcasm and constant mocking, this neurological squatter plants seeds of doubt within Philip and provides the inner conflict he must battle in tandem with the more practical threats potentially lurking around every corner.

Playing for the first time back in 2008, I got frustrated with some of the puzzles; there were points where I couldn't see any clear indication as

IT'S LIKE PLAYING HIDE & SEEK WITH AN UNPREDICTABLY VIOLENT OLDER SIBLING

to what I should be doing, but subsequent playthroughs revealed that there is logic here. Sometimes the solutions require old-school item combining, or more gruesomely the sourcing of severed body parts which provide useful biometric data.

There is little eye candy here, except in some of the more psychedelic sequences. I even played through a second time as a sort of speed run for this Reinstall, purely to see if I could get more eye-catching

screenshots than those you see above. Nope. But then you can't really expect Cyrodiil when you're playing a survival horror game. Fortunately, the story itself is compelling enough, and the urge to unearth each unpleasant surprise provides the game with a decidedly morbid but satisfying impetus. The way it generates tension is accomplished: there are not really that many Infected in the game – it's all about the sounds and creative spawn triggers.

Still widely available and sometimes bundled together with its companion titles, *Penumbra: Black Plague* is like playing a game of hide and seek with an excitable and unpredictably violent older sibling. You know if you're caught you'll be in for a pummelling or worse, but if you're hunkered down safely hidden behind the furniture and the danger passes, well, you've won a victory of sorts. Although the creative violence of *Dead Space* would raise the bar for survival horror games later that same year, *Black Plague* dispelled in its own modest way any misconceptions that dismembering or shooting abominations in the face is the only way to enjoy the genre. ■

CHEATING DEATH IN

TAKE ON MARS

Struggling for survival in a Mars exploration sim

by Andy Kelly

The Meridiani Planum is a vast, empty desert of volcanic basalt, and my home for the foreseeable future. There was an accident – I remember a storm, an explosion, and not much else – and now I'm alone. NASA thinks I'm dead, the rest of my team are on their way home, and the next mission to Mars is five years away. I'm pretty much fucked.

THE RULES

1 Build a new home on Mars.

2 Become completely self-sufficient.

3 Get Matt Damon to play me in the film version.

The first thing I hear when I wake is *beep, beep, beep*. A red light is flashing in my helmet, warning me that I have three minutes of oxygen left. I struggle to my feet and scan the horizon. Nothing. I'm surrounded by a red, flat plain littered with rocks and craters. Then I spot something in the distance: a curiously geometrical shape silhouetted against the dusky pink of the Martian sky.

The lander! The craft we touched down in, which is stocked with supplies including sweet, precious, life-giving air. It's far away, but I might just make it. *Beep, beep, beep*. I have to run in bursts, because the exertion of a prolonged sprint will make me take deep, wasteful breaths. I reach the lander and slam the button that opens the cargo bay. It's achingly, painfully slow. The beeping intensifies. Thirty seconds left.

The door slides open and I dash inside, taking the elevator to the pressurised safety of the crew quarters. Tearing off my helmet, I collapse in an exhausted heap. I made it! But the elation quickly fades when I remember that I'm still alone on a hostile planet with limited food and water, no way to communicate with Earth, and five years to kill. Not the best situation I've ever been in.

I could live here in the lander, I suppose. It has beds, food, water. But when the supplies run out – there's about a month's worth in the hold – I'll either starve or die of thirst. I need space to grow my own food and somewhere more comfortable to live.

This trip to the Victoria crater almost killed me.

I venture outside again. Located just south of the equator, the Meridiani Planum is scattered with a crystalline mineral called hematite: evidence that hot springs may have bubbled here millions of years ago. Now it's a wasteland, pockmarked with craters. In the distance, jutting incongruously out of the emptiness, is a strange ridge formation. Curiosity gets the better of me.

The lander is equipped with a scouting buggy – a glorified go-kart, really – which I drive towards the ridge. It's incredibly slow, only marginally faster than walking. When I reach the rock formation, I realise it's the lip of an immense crater: the Victoria crater to be precise. Half a mile wide and seventy metres deep, it's a colossal thing, but not much use to me. I'm gazing across it, listening to the eerie, lonely howl of the wind, when a message flashes up on my HUD: *Solar event incoming*.

Mars is routinely pounded by solar storms. If I get caught in one, even with a suit on, I'll receive a lethal dose of radiation. And according to the data on my HUD, one is on its way. I jump back in the buggy and start trundling back to the lander, which suddenly looks impossibly far away. It's another close call, but I make it back with seconds to spare and wait for the storm to pass. I decide that's enough exploring for me. I've got plenty of problems to deal with as it is.

FRESH PRINTS

I eat a freeze-dried steak for dinner and sleep on a small cot bed in the lander to escape the chill of the Martian night. Near the equator, during the day, temperatures on Mars can reach a balmy 20 degrees; but at night they drop as low as -70. When the sun rises, I decide to initiate phase one of Operation Don't Die: building myself somewhere to live. I unpack the enormous 3D printer stored in the cargo bay and assemble it outside.

What follows is a gruelling three hours of printing out corners, walls, floors and other parts, then painstakingly slotting them together, piece by piece, to create my new home. It's a slow, laborious process that would have been a lot easier if my team hadn't flown back to Earth and left me here to die. I begin by driving metal platforms – the foundations of the building – into the

I DECIDE TO INITIATE PHASE ONE OF 'OPERATION DON'T DIE'
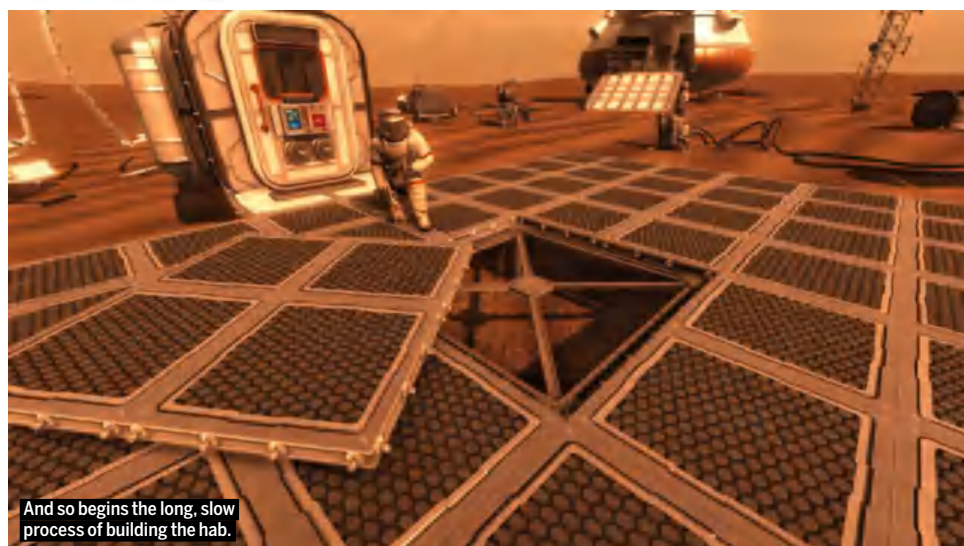
And so begins the long, slow process of building the hab.

EARTH VS MARS

Comparing the Red Planet to our own

	EARTH	MARS
DISTANCE FROM SUN	93 million miles	142 million miles
LENGTH OF YEAR	365 days	687 days
LENGTH OF DAY	23 hours, 56 minutes	24 hours, 37 minutes
AVERAGE TEMPERATURE	57 degrees (F)	-81 degrees (F)
DIAMETER	7,926 miles	4,220 miles
ORBIT SPEED	18.5 miles per second	14.5 miles per second

Martian soil. Then I clip on floors, walls, windows, power points, and, finally, the roof. To speed things up I print out two additional 3D printers and make sure they're constantly churning out parts as I build.

Before I snap on the last few bits of wall, I print out everything I need for the interior: a bed, a couch, storage crates, a toilet, a table to work on, two hydroponic stations, and a water dispenser. Then I toss them through the gap in the wall and seal it up. The last step is the airlock, which I'll need to keep the room pressurised. I build a small corridor, equip it with two suit holders, and install a pair of heavy airlock doors. Done. I step inside, close the airlock, and hold my breath. Did it work? 'EXT. SAFE' blinks on the HUD in reassuring green text, indicating that I can safely remove my suit. I did it!

It's not much, but it's a vast improvement over the lander. If I had help I could have built a base with multiple rooms, but for now this will have to serve as both my living quarters and my science lab. I can easily expand later. I arrange the furniture and equipment and end up with a pretty swish-looking pad. I move some of the freeze-dried meals, emergency oxygen tanks, and backup suits from the lander to the hab and watch a gorgeous Martian sunset as I eat dinner. As another solar storm rages outside, I settle in for the night. Tomorrow I can start to sort out the water situation.

HARVEST MOON

Mars may look dead, but the air and soil are rich with resources I can harvest to keep myself alive. First, water. I print out a topsoil extractor, hook it up to a solar panel, and plug in two resource canisters. Then I build a refinery while I wait for the canisters to fill. The yield is low, but by processing the collected soil in the refinery I can extract fresh, drinkable water. I fill a few canisters and store them safely in the hab, plugging one into the water dispenser. I'll make sure the topsoil extractor is running constantly to keep the water flowing. That's one problem solved.

I still have a decent supply of freeze-dried meals, so I can wait a while before I have to think about growing food in this desolate place. In the meantime, I tackle a problem that's been bugging me ever since I finished the hab. In the process of building it I accumulated a massive pile of junk. Mostly parts I printed out by mistake, including a third airlock door. I keep bumping into it as I walk around the site, and it looks messy, so it's time to get rid of it. I refuse to live in in squalor.

After three hours of building, the hab is done.
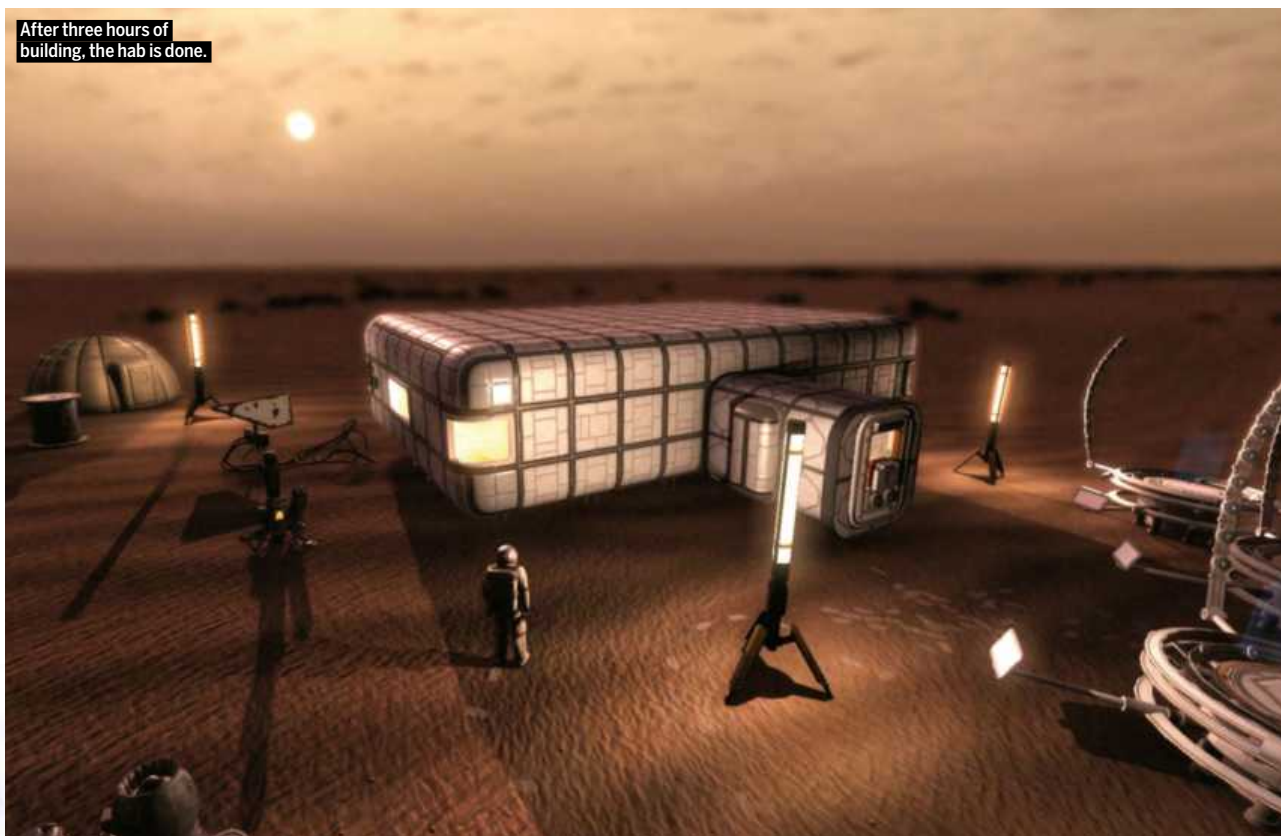
The hab ain't much, but at least it's comfortable.

This drill extracts rock from the surface.

I use the 3D printer to construct a cargo truck. It's big and slow, but has a massive bed for storing and transporting stuff. I spend some time gathering all the bits of junk strewn around the base and load them on the back. Then I drive about half a mile away and unload it. I did consider throwing it in the Victoria crater, but I don't think NASA would appreciate me using an area of scientific interest as a garbage dump. I return to base, and it looks much neater. Satisfied that I've had a productive day, I eat some steak – again – and retire for the evening.

When I wake up, a dust storm is raging outside, but it doesn't look too severe. One of the supply crates in the lander has bags of potato seeds, so I strap my suit on, brace myself, and step outside. Jogging over to the lander I pick up the seeds, grabbing a canister of freshly-harvested topsoil on the way back. The storm has covered my solar panels in dust,

which I'll have to clean later. Back in the safety of the hab, I plug the soil can into one of my hydroponics stations, along with a can of water, and plant the seeds.

FEEDING TIME
It's not long before five healthy potato plants spring up. Just so you know, Bowie: there *is* life on Mars.

I spend the next few days harvesting resources, clearing up junk, and tending to my potato plants. I expand the hab with a small room to put the toilet in, because having it inches from my bed just feels wrong. I'm beginning to adjust to life on Mars, despite the solitude. I keep myself sane through routine, occasionally going for a slow drive

around the Victoria crater to entertain myself.

Before long I have my first crop of potatoes. I pick some to eat, and save the rest for replanting. It's taken a while, but I'm finally self-sufficient. I have the means to reliably produce water, food, oxygen, and power. It won't be the easiest five years, but I should be able to get through them.

I'll keep expanding the hab in the coming years, with more hydroponics stations, more resource extractors, and more rooms. But for now I have everything I need to survive. Who knows, maybe NASA will realise I'm still alive and mount a rescue mission? Then I might only be here for two years – the length of a journey to Mars – instead of five. Either way, I've accepted my fate. I'm going to be here for a very long time, so I might as well get comfortable. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some potatoes to harvest. ■

HAVING THE TOILET INCHES FROM MY BED JUST FEELS WRONG

RED ALERT'S ANT MISSIONS

In praise of Westwood's weird little Easter Egg. *By Samuel Roberts*

RIGHT: There are three types of ants: fire, brown and red. The fire ants can wipe out multiple units at a time, so they need to die first.
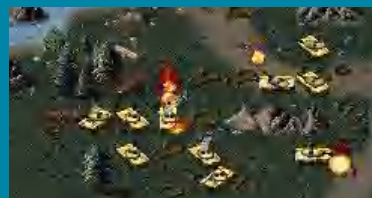
The ant missions were the stuff of legend when I was a kid. Load *Red Alert*'s *Counterstrike* add-on, a friend at school told me, then shift-click on the speaker in the top right corner of the game's menu screen. This, supposedly, would unlock a sequence of missions where the Allied forces would go to war with enormous ants. Yeah, right. Kids talk a lot of bullshit when they're ten or eleven. When I got home, I clicked on the speaker and it was like Bruce Wayne's bookcase sliding away to reveal the entrance to the Batcave. I was instantly obsessed.

Activating the mission strand triggers an FMV sequence with an enormous ant atop a pile of human bones, complete with the heading 'It came from Red Alert!' in a kitschy horror poster font. The first mission is a completely different slant on *Red Alert* – you start with just a few soldiers and a ranger jeep, tasked with looking for an abandoned base where giant ants are rumoured to have been sighted. When you find the base – if the ants don't get you first – it's a wreck, and you've got no construction yard, meaning there's no way of replacing buildings if they're blown up. Then the ants arrive. They're deadlier than any other unit in the game.

On my first playthrough, the ants closed in and destroyed my defences almost immediately. In the midst of horrible screeching sounds and human death, they took apart all my buildings before rounding on my remaining men and wiping them out. I was eleven, and sad. I'd finished most missions in *Red Alert* prior to

▸ NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
1997

EXPECT TO PAY
Freeware

OUR REVIEW
87%

LINK
www.bit.ly/1HrnlOF

this, but for the first time I was playing a survival RTS. The first ant mission takes all of your most precious and powerful toys away. You've got nothing but jeeps, riflemen and grenadiers to help you put up a defence – no tanks, no aircraft, no Tanya. Basically, you've just got the C-team. It's brilliantly tense.

The ants can wipe out one soldier a second. I must have lost that first ant mission about ten times when I was a kid. These days it's still tricky, but I've memorised exactly how to do it: you spread tons of rifleman to each entry point on the map, and make sure each outpost is topped up with cannon fodder. This is a mode about barely staving off defeat, rather than bombastic military victory. That's what I love about it.

THEM!

The map expands for the second level, which involves rescuing civilians from two nearby villages and ensuring they get safe passage to the island in the north. Problem is, there's a nest between the two locations, which infinitely spawns red ants. The way to keep the civilians alive is to cut off three bridges that lead to the island containing the nest. You're sending tons of slightly crap tanks and grenadiers to certain death as they try to blow them up. The ants

swarm to protect the bridges, and failing to destroy them will mobilise them all towards your base. Worse still, gathering ore to build more units is risky as hell: an ant can destroy your expensive ore trucks within seconds. If this happens, the cannon fodder tap turns off and you're done. Get the civilians out, though, and overcoming the odds with so few resources feels fantastic.

In the third mission, you're gassing nests to stop them spawning, and in the final mission, Extermination, you go underground into these tunnels where the creatures came from. In Aliens style, you seek out the queen ant, who is a giant static structure that zaps you with electricity like *Red Alert*'s tesla coils. Destroying her and the accompanying larvae completes this mini campaign.

This neat angle on *Red Alert* would almost certainly be sliced off and turned into £6.99 DLC if it was released today. People tend to bring it up almost right away when I talk to them about the game. Imagine a big developer today bolting-on missions that radically remix what their game's about while adding an entirely new side to the fiction, and then hiding all that in a menu screen. This was a special one-off from a very specific era of PC gaming. ■
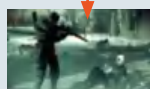
NOVELTY ADD-ONS

Games get silly

Red Alert's ant missions were a one-off at the time – but there's been a recent surge of novelty horror/supernatural missions for mostly real-world based games. Here's how that happened.
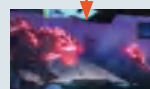
RED DEAD REDEMPTION: UNDEAD NIGHTMARE 2010
This console-only expansion turned Rockstar's Wild West into a supernatural nightmare world, and was incredibly successful. Result: quite a few people borrow the idea.
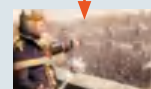
SNIPER ELITE 2: NAZI ZOMBIE ARMY 2013
Nazis and zombies naturally go hand-in-hand. The two met in this add-on.

FAR CRY 3: BLOOD DRAGON 2013
Far Cry 3's release model was similar to *Red Dead*'s: cheaper, standalone, with a novelty theme.

AC III: THE TYRANNY OF KING WASHINGTON 2013
A mad George Washington declares himself king.

SAINTS ROW IV 2013
Starting out as an expansion for *Saints Row: The Third*, it grew into an entire game and the best in the series.
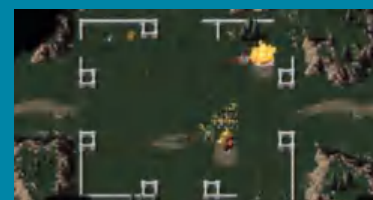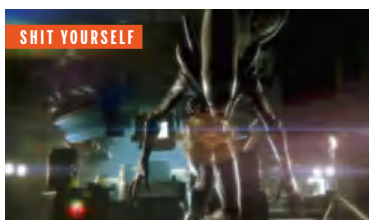
LEFT: In the second mission, the only way to cut off the infinitely respawning ants is to take out the bridges around the nest.

ANDY KELLY

I love games with deep systems, atmospheric worlds and evocative stories. But then sometimes I just want to play car football.

SHIT YOURSELF

ALIEN: ISOLATION

www.alienisolation.com

→ Stricken space station Sevastopol is one of my favourite videogame settings. Echoing the retro-future production design of Ridley Scott's Alien, it's a hell of a place to be chased by a rampaging xenomorph. Hide-and-seek horror games are nothing new, but *Isolation*'s dynamic AI sets it apart from its peers.

SOLVE A CRIME

HER STORY

www.herstorygame.com

→ One of the most uniquely structured stories I've encountered in a game or otherwise. It's completely non-linear, and your path through the story will differ from everyone else's, but its revelations and twists somehow pack the punch of a scripted narrative. A police procedural with a difference.
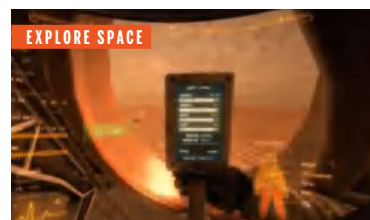
EXPLORE SPACE

TAKE ON MARS

www.takeonmars.com

→ A realistic space exploration simulator, set primarily on the planet Mars. You can use the probe and rover technology of today, or leap into the future and embark on manned missions. Whether you're building a colony or collecting soil samples, this is a curiously compelling, atmospheric game.

KICK BALLS

ROCKET LEAGUE

www.rocketleaguegame.com

→ I hate football, and I'm not really into cars, but I love *Rocket League*. It's one of the most exciting, fast-paced competitive multiplayer games on PC, and whenever I have a spare ten minutes, I always find myself loading it up for a quick game or two. Who knew a game about cars playing football would be so good.

MUST ★ PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST OF THE BEST GAMES YOU CAN PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Andy Kelly
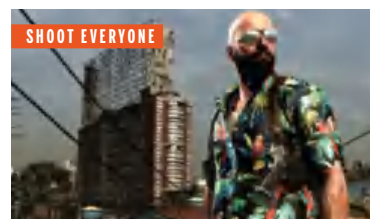
SHOOT EVERYONE

MAX PAYNE 3

www.maxpayne3.com

→ It desperately lacks the surreal, self-aware humour of Remedy's games, but this stylish shooter is a thrilling ten-hour ride. With lavish production values, an amazing score by noise-rock band HEALTH, and cinematic slow-motion combat, it's one of the most intense action games you can play on PC.
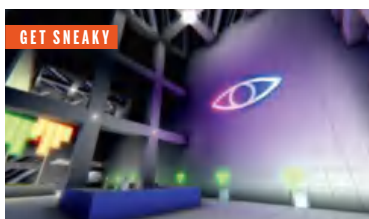
GET SNEAKY

NEON STRUCT

www.neonstruct.com

→ Don't be fooled by the flat textures and simple geometry of the levels: this stealth game is surprisingly deep. Inspired by the likes of *Deus Ex* and *Thief*, it requires you to use an array of gadgets to infiltrate guarded buildings in a cyberpunk city. The knee-slide, used to slink between cover, is especially satisfying.

MEET TERRIBLE PEOPLE

DAYZ

www.dayzgame.com

→ I've never enjoyed an online game more than this. Not because of the zombies or the survival elements, but the people. That tense moment of running into someone and wondering if they're friend or foe always makes my heart race, even though it's usually the latter. *DayZ* is part game, part social experiment.
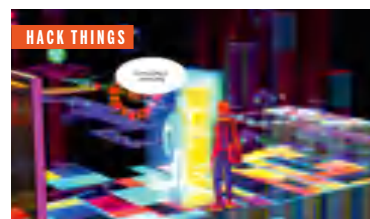
HACK THINGS

ELSE HEART.BREAK()

www.elseheartbreak.com

→ This weird, wonderful game by a group of Swedish developers is set in a world where the very fabric of reality can be hacked and altered. This is the basis for a very cool, very strange open-world adventure about friendship, romance and rebellion. And don't worry if you can't code: anyone can play and enjoy it.

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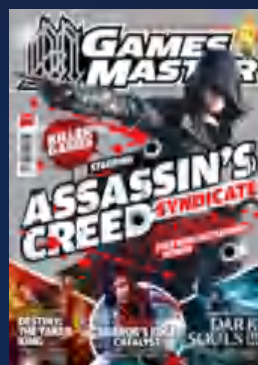
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